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Editor's Note

Blurred Lines

LAST YEAR, in between layouts during our Hip-hop Class of 2024 cover shoot, the topic of brawls between rock fans and hip-hop fans in Megamall during the '90s came about. It's hard to imagine it happening nowadays, and it sounds like a fever dream.

Collaborations between artists like the Eraserheads and Francis M. during that era screamed punk essence and stood out as blatant acts of defiance to scenes that put themselves in a box.

Times change and the divides of yesterday have faded into memory. What I love most about the "all-music-access" generation is that the majority seems to have full diplomas in vibe appreciation.

Why is this good news, you ask? New ideas are easily accepted, experimentation is encouraged, and the stems for the collab have been emailed, my friend.

Yes, what a wonderful time we live in — not only are we experiencing subcultures being thrown into a blender, but the collaborations are here and are in every form.

We love to see them and we want more of them. In this issue, we celebrate collaboration through genre crossovers, supergroup formations, generational exchange, and number one songs!

So forget going fast 'cause we want to see the industry go far — just remember, collaboration is key.

Bret

BRET JACKSON

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FEBRUARY 15, 2025 / VOLUME X YEAR2

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7 .ARCHIVES Tamashi Pants
8 .ARCHIVES Sabre Skirt

It's one thing to make one viral hit, but if you want to really stand out, you have to look the part, too.

Music and fashion have gone hand-in-hand for as long as we can remember, and with all the trends that change in the blink of an eye, it's important to find a style that brings out your artistry and transcends shifting tastes, making you look edgy and fashion-forward in any era.

Homegrown conceptwear brand .ARCHIVES has produced modern pieces that have been worn by the likes of Hev Abi, SB19, and more, and have been presented in fashion shows in Paris and Tokyo. Its designs are more "future wear" than streetwear, and wearing them will make you turn heads and give you a look that's ahead of your time. **b**

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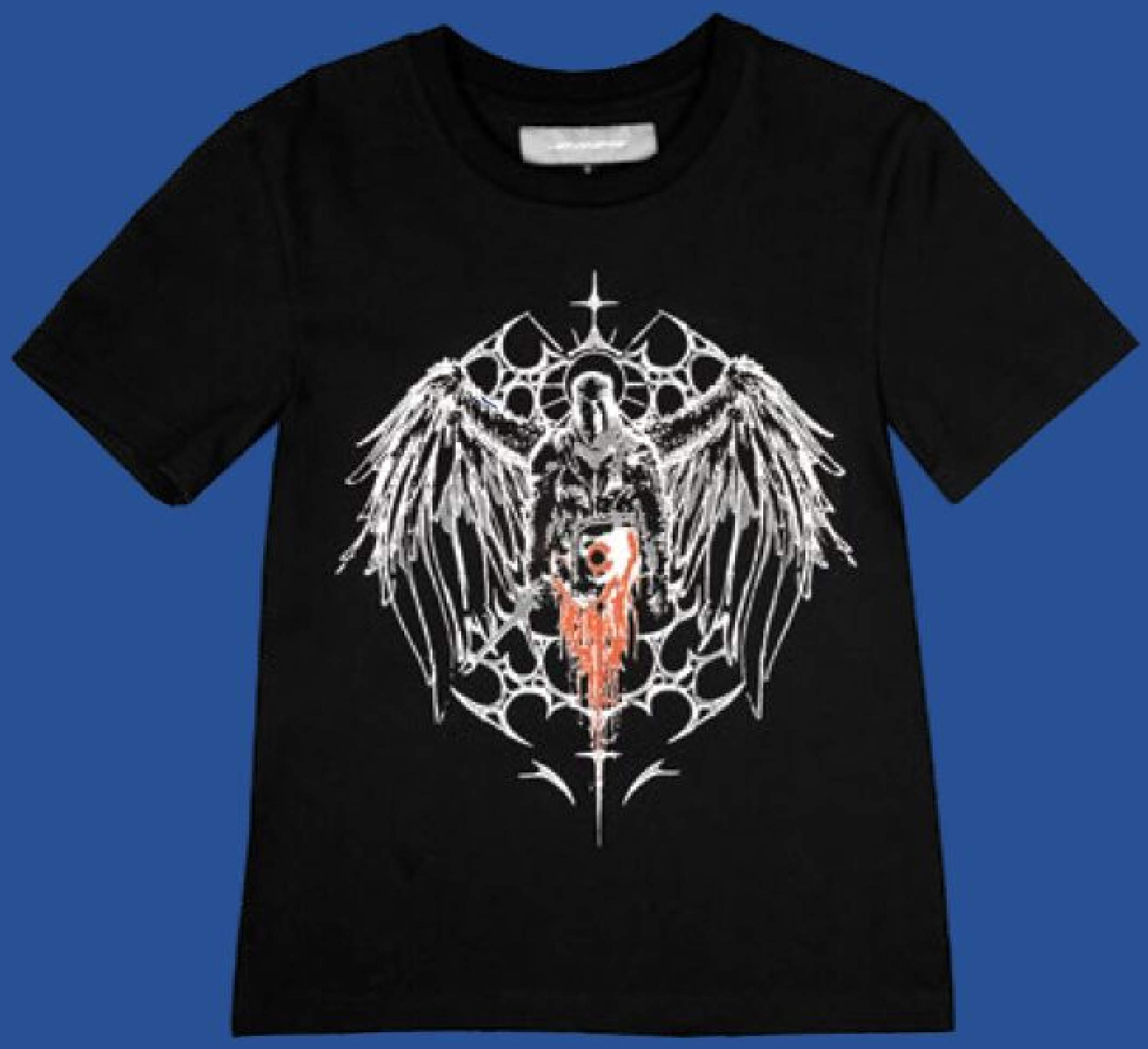

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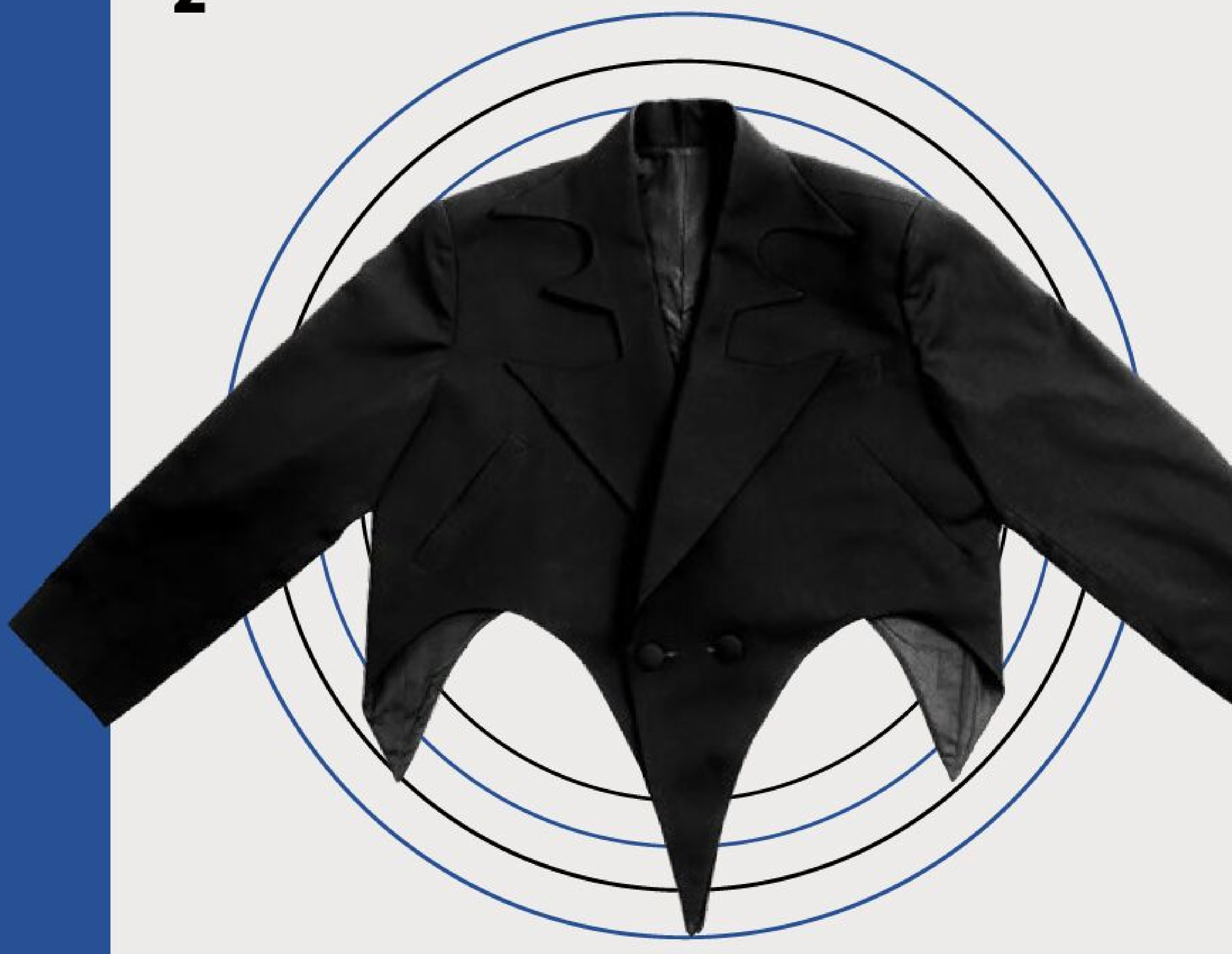

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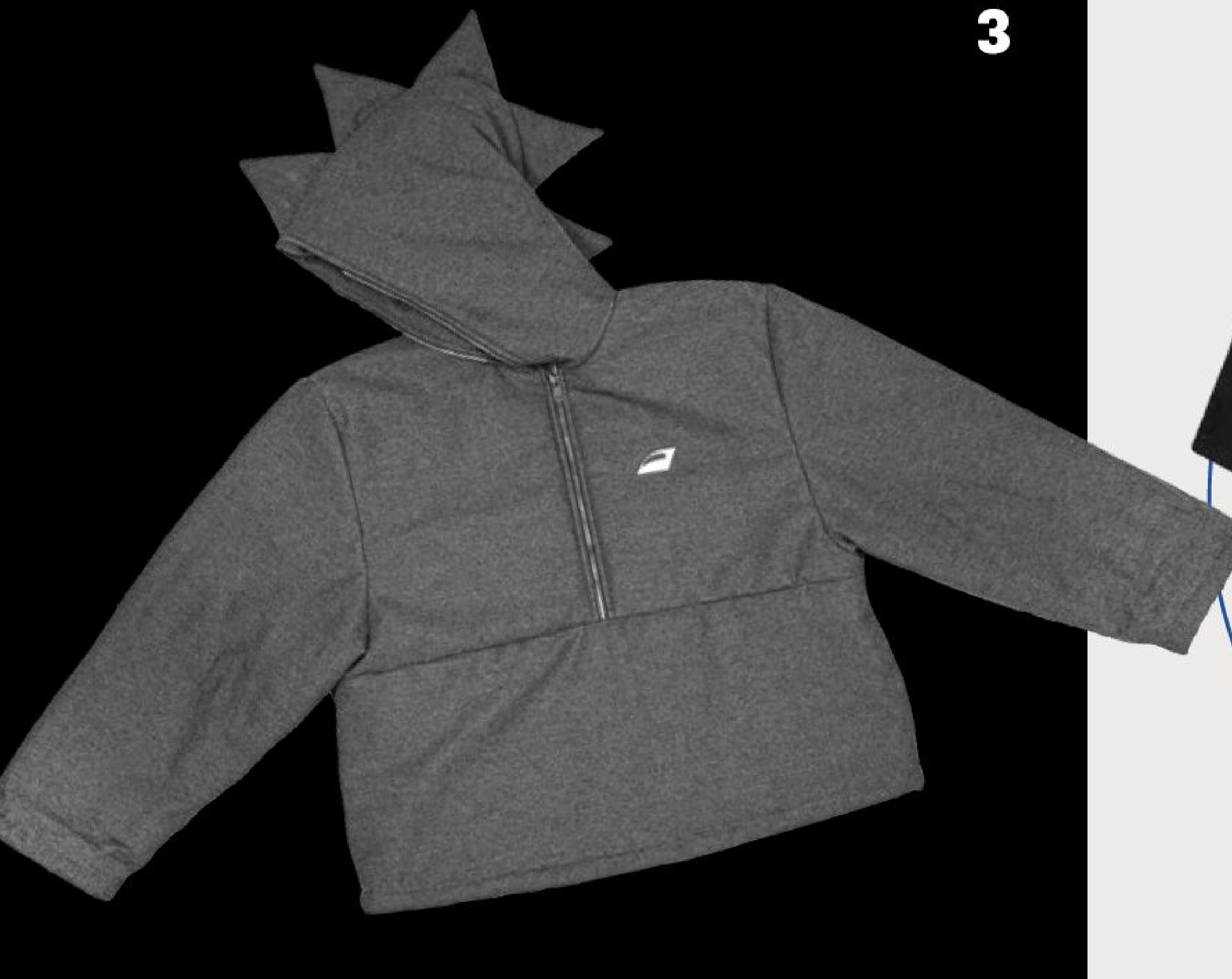

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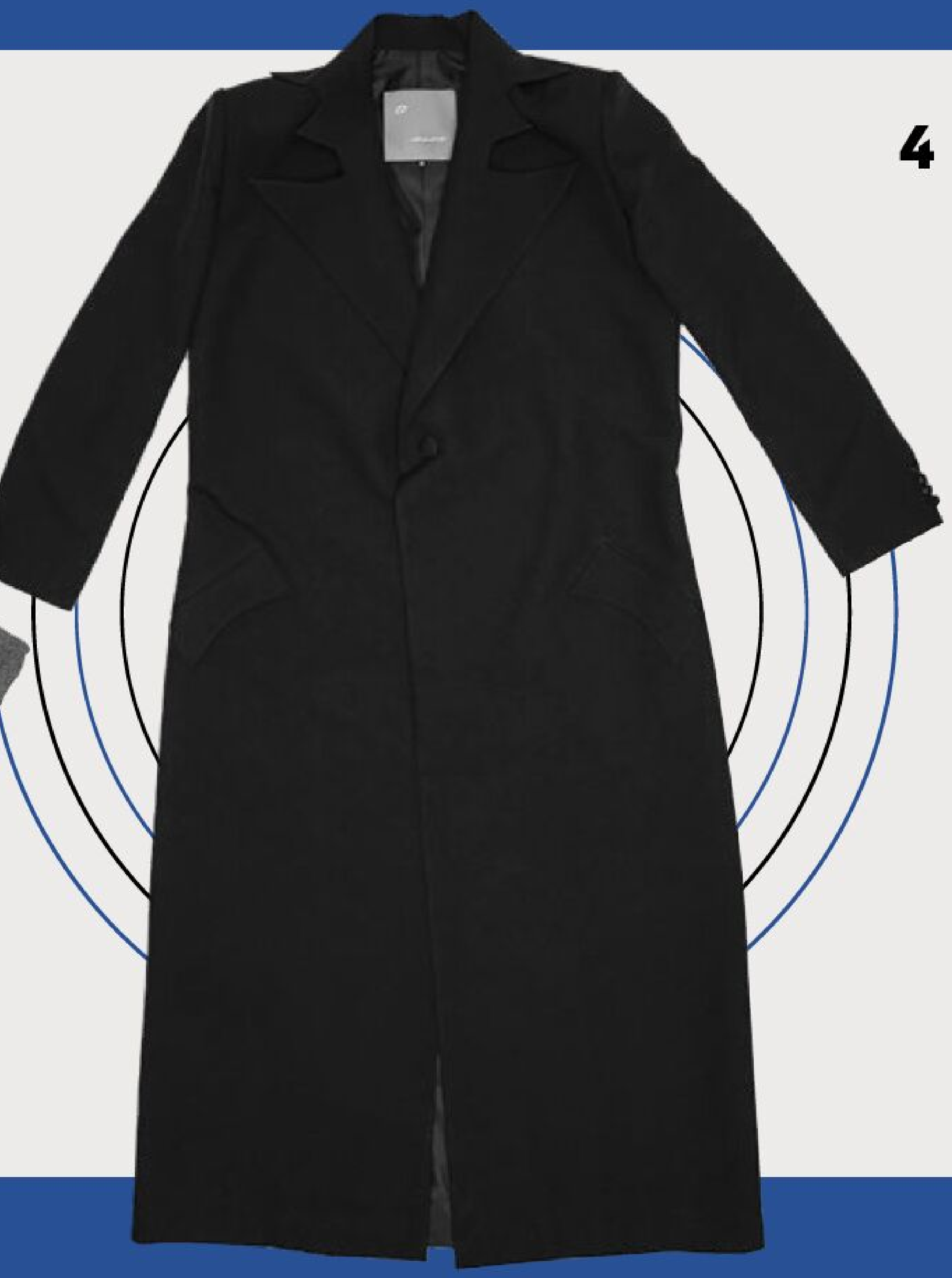

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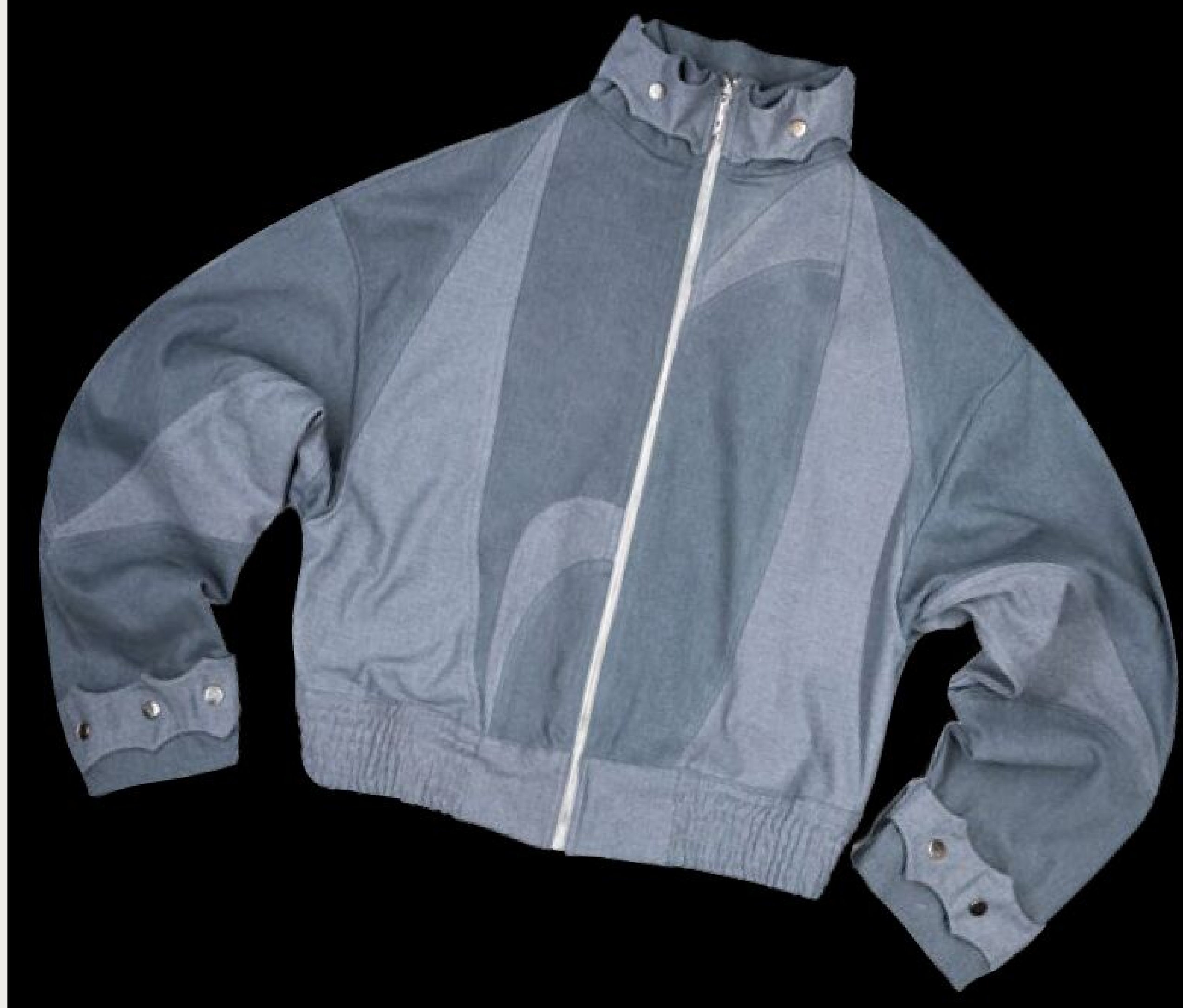

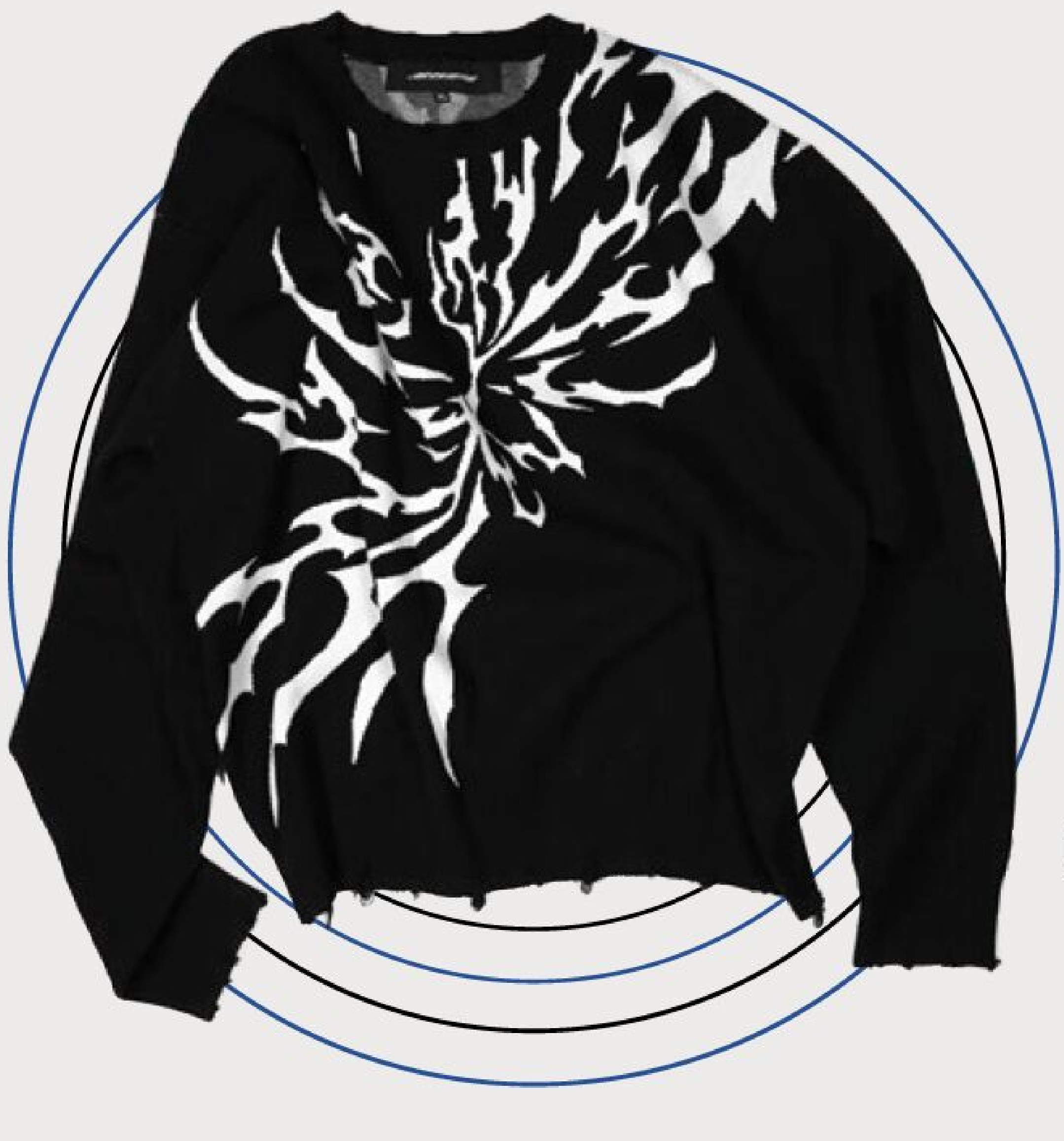

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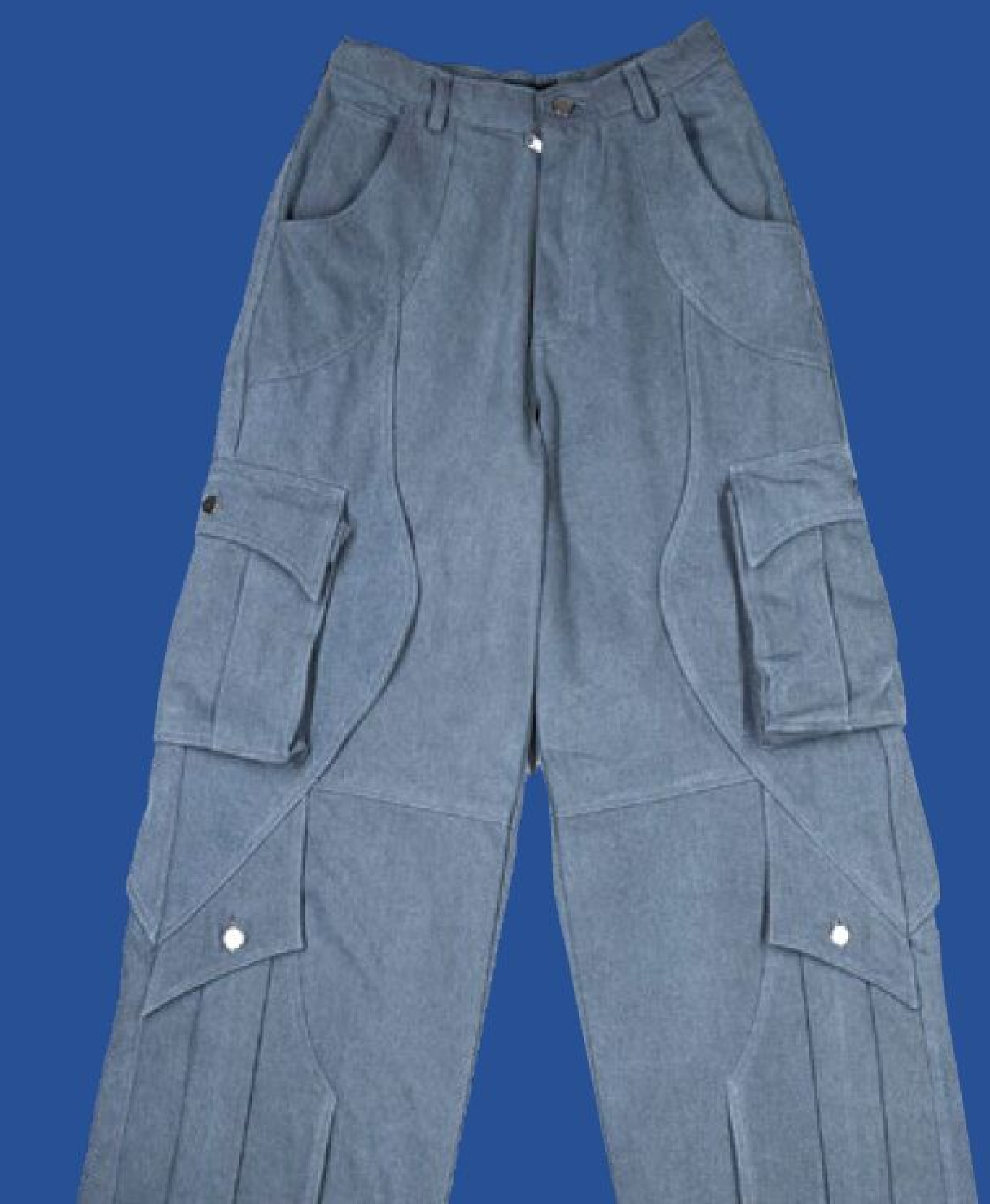

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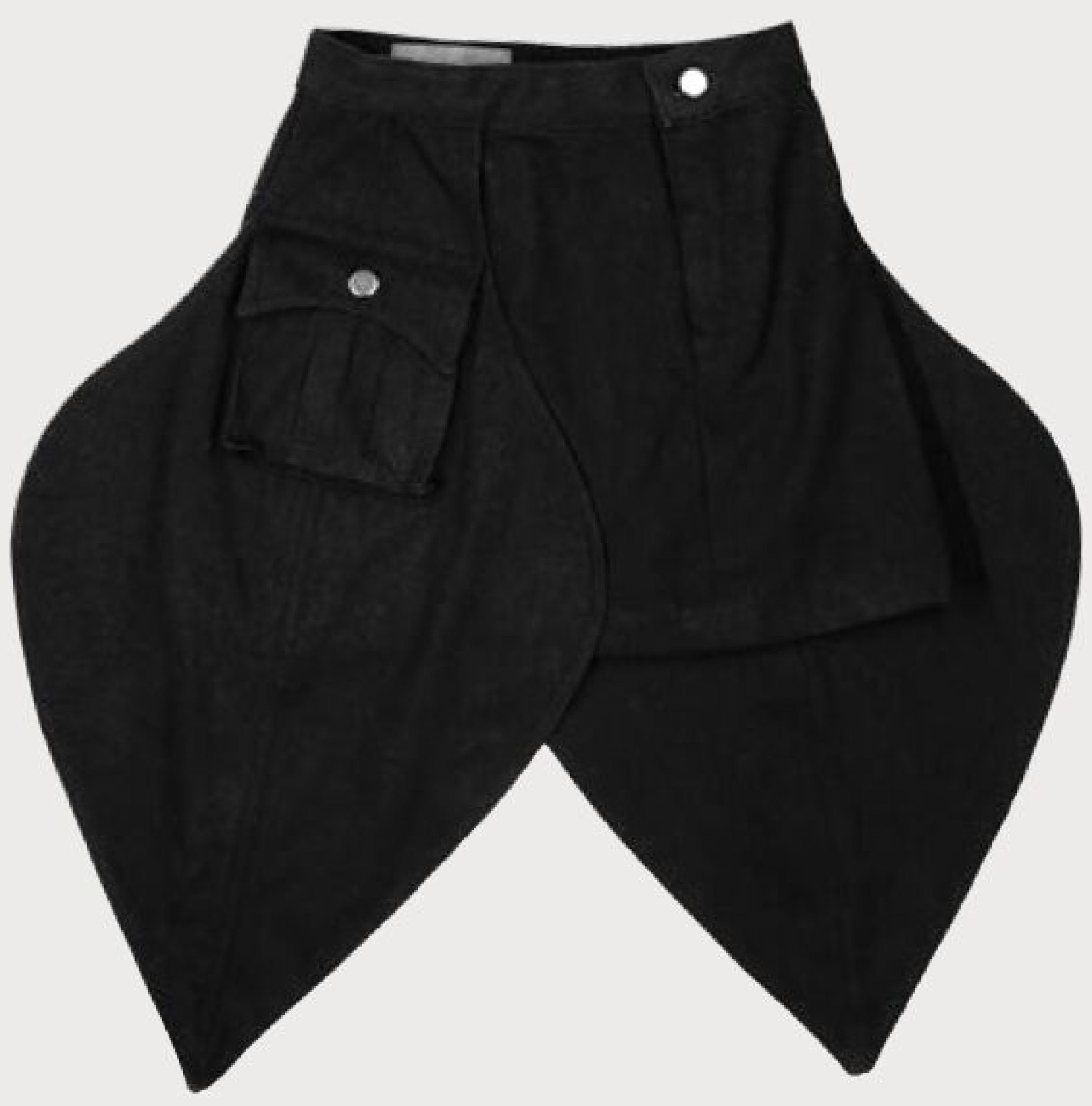

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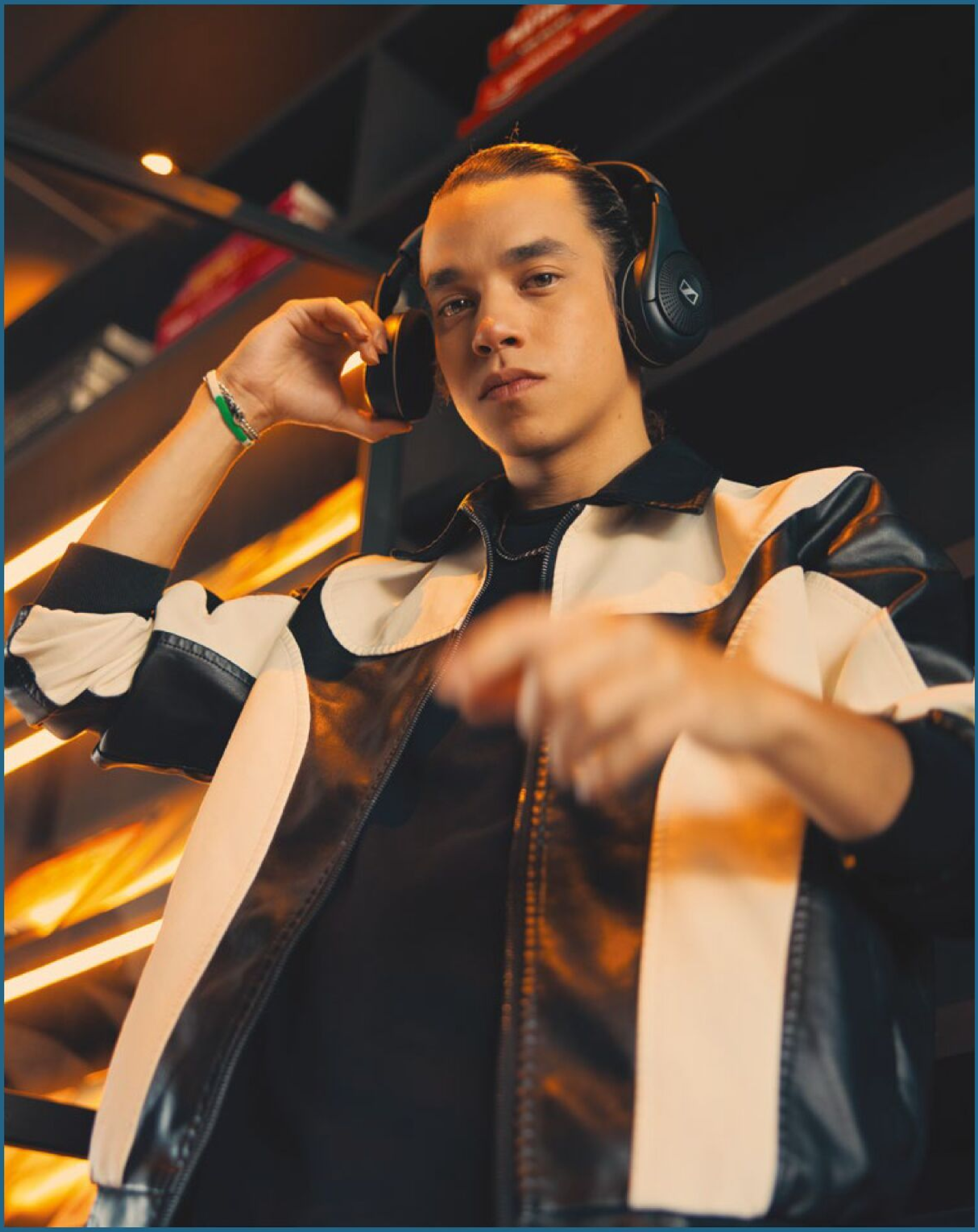

Real Recognizes Real: Ez Mil On Working With Eminem

The fast rising American-based Filipino rapper reflects on the co-sign of the lifetime, collaborating with a hip-hop icon, and what the future holds for him

BY LEX CELERA

HIP-HOP WAS NOT ON EZ MIL'S MIND when he began to think of his future. Nor was music. The then-teenager's dream was to be a pro skater or a soccer player. Constantly on the go, in sports or otherwise ("I would get into trouble sometimes," he admits), the Olongapo local was on the cusp of seeing new ways to see the world, including one through music.

But after one particular day of hanging out with his friends in the bleachers after a day on the soccer field, he ended up borrowing his cousin's iPod and listening to Eminem. Two songs he heard that day, "Mockingbird" and "Lose Yourself," ended up etched in his mind.

"He just knew how to put his words together. It made me think like it made me imagine the words he was saying, and it was so vivid," he says. "It was the first time I ever considered getting a phone."

After immigrating to the United States, he explored his passion for music by casting a wide net across genres. His YouTube upload history reveals a discography that features the likes of melodic pop borderline veering into emo territory, speed metal guitar riffs, and atmospheric trap beat instrumentals. He would share freestyles of him playing either an acoustic or electric guitar.

Ultimately it was in hip-hop that he took off. It was less than five years ago when his entry to a beat challenge made popular by a Filipino music producer circulated online, partly because of the multilingual lyrics, rapid-fire delivery, and clear enunciation, but also because he nonchalantly mocked the music producer at the end. It was an introduction by way of provocation in 24 bars — something the likes of Slim Shady would not only be capable of, but willing.

In the same year, he released his first album *Act 1*, and with it "Panalo (Trap Cariñosa)," whose Wish Bus USA performance raked in 84 million YouTube views and millions more across digital

PHOTOS BY MAT ABAD

streaming. "Panalo" and its patriotic lean catapulted him to the Philippine consciousness, landing him guest spots in popular midday variety shows and celebrity vlogs. More than once he was referred to as the "Eminem of the Philippines." The year after that, he performed a cover of "Lose Yourself" on stage, including at the 1MX Dubai 2021 music festival.

Two years later, Ez Mil was announced as the newest artist to have a direct joint deal with Interscope Records, Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment, and Eminem's Shady Records at 25 years old; he is the second to have landed that distinct deal, coming after 50 Cent.

"We thought it was just a fluke," Ez Mil says when receiving an email from Paul Rosenberg, co-founder of Shady Records. "[My girlfriend] kind of just brushed it off because the email wasn't written in a way that was too professional, you know." It was Virgin Music, his label at that time, that informed them that the email was indeed from Mr. Rosenberg.

After some calls and emails, a meeting was set up in Dr. Dre's residence. "It was like an out-of-body experience. I didn't think [Dr. Dre's] place would be huge and his studio being underground. That was wild." Ecstatic, he brought his laptop, which had pieces of a song that would end up becoming "Releast," his first collaboration with Eminem.

"He's really locked in and that's his schedule time," he says regarding Eminem's much-talked-about recording schedule. "He's in at nine, out at five, six, or seven at the latest."

When asked about any changes in his own process, he pauses. "To be honest, I'm doing my best to try to follow suit because I'm used to… how would I say it? I work from home. There you go."

Another opportunity to work with Eminem came about a year after, with "Head Honcho," where Ez Mil's use of Tagalog again drew headlines from both Philippine and international media.

"We flew out to Detroit to go to his studio and even try Mom's Spaghetti. We were wrapping up 'Realest' and trying to give its finishing touches. Em wrote his verse and every single little part of it. We were arranging the ending section of how we would come back to the hook."

"Em suddenly said like, 'Yo, bro, can you just take a break real quick. I'll call you back in,' something like that. And then I just went out to my mom's and my girl and we were just at the lobby hanging out. And then called me back in and then suddenly I'm hearing this new beat. It was the intro to 'Head Honcho' but it was just the strings. And they were coming up with the drum parts, and I just had to butt in, you know. There was a little keyboard there. His engineer was like, 'You want to try something? Okay, here you go.' I was like, 'No, no, no. I'm good.' They let me put a little hi-hat on the beat and then [it was] finished."

One could draw several parallels between Eminem and Ez Mil, including a taste for vitriol, a complex, obfuscated public persona, and stylistic leanings that venture heavily into rap lyricism, but it is arguably their dedication to be uncompromising in their direction, both personal and artistic, that would make them kindred spirits. Ez Mil's father, Paul Sapiera of the band Rockstar, has been quoted in saying that Dr. Dre and Eminem see him as a younger brother, but the young rap star is quick to qualify: "They see me as a long-lost younger brother."

On top of a historic co-sign, he has had his fair share of historic moments and accolades, including being featured in the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list and landing a campaign for a global alcohol brand. But the pressure of figuring out what's next rests on his shoulders.

"Eminem and Dr. Dre, knowing how they are, they literally, 'just keep doing what you're doing.' Man, so what more of doing me? I'm, for real, stunted, because, like, it's not narrowed at all. They like everything I do. So I'm trying to refine that for my next projects and see really, what the next sound really is going to take me, with their approval."

He shares that he's currently interested in exploring the R&B genre, mentioning Lil Wayne's "Mrs. Officer," Filipino R&B artist Dionela ("He knows how to work his way around the studio and make his songs sound really good and polished), and Hev Abi's "Alam Mo Ba Girl" ("That song has soul to it. It sort of sounds like an old school R&B hip hop joint").

Alternatively, he also shares his appreciation of hip-hop songs that are rooted in storytelling, mentioning Loonie's "Tumbang Preso," Dello's "Itim na Angel" and Kolateral's "Boy" featuring Kartell'em and BLKD as close inspirations. "I love it when artists put the story first and make sure that they have their experience in the song," he says.

When asked what can be expected from him this year, he didn't delve into the specifics. "What I can say is to expect the unexpected. Definitely more new material and more content, that's for sure. Steady working, man."

"He's really locked in. He's in at nine, out at five, six, or seven at the latest"

EZ MIL ON EMINEM

Unleashed And Unstoppable: Juggernaut

Formed by five battle-hardened rock and heavy music veterans, this Filipino metal quintet discusses finding their sound, facing new challenges, the key to great collaboration, and being labeled as a "supergroup"

BY MAYKS GO

MUCH LIKE HOW CERTAIN ELEMENTS form synergetic reactions when combined, the same can be said when certain musicians join forces, ultimately bringing forth monumental team-ups unlike any other.

In the realm of Filipino heavy music, an outstanding example of this is Juggernaut — a metal five-piece formed by veteran rock, heavy metal, and hardcore musicians in the local music scene — namely, vocalist Rod Rodrigo (Vie), drummer Allan "Bords" Burdeos (Kamikazee, Tricia), bassist Russell Dela Cruz (Skychurch), and guitarists Ariel Lumanlan (Arcadia) and Jomal Linao (Kamikazee, Talata, Skychurch, Tricia).

ORIGINS

The band started out as an idea Burdeos had in 2016, born from a desire to also play in a metal band much like his Kamikazee bandmate Linao was doing with Skychurch. In fact, Skychurch's vocalist, bassist, and primary songwriter Russell Dela Cruz, Burdeos shares, was actually a key figure in him and Linao finding love for the heavy genre.

From there, the duo slowly fleshed out the would-be sound of the band before enlisting the help of another guitarist in the form of Lumanlan. Eventually, Rodrigo was added on vocals and, sooner or later, after a search for a bassist, they eventually completed the band's current iteration in 2022 with Dela Cruz himself.

THE SOUND OF METAL

Given how each of them came from different backgrounds of rock and heavy music, coming up with the kind of sonic direction that Juggernaut's music would possess was something the band naturally discovered as they continued rehearsing together. *"Nag-jive na lang kaming lima tapos wala kaming sinusundan na 'gusto' naming* genre *ng* band. *Basta maingay!"* shares Linao

PHOTOS BY NIKO CEZAR OF KNYA COLLECTIVE

Left to right: Jomal Linao, Ariel Lumanlan, Russell Dela Cruz, Rod Rodrigo, Allan “Bords” Burdeos

> “*Yung* goal *ng* Juggernaut is to create the best possible music *na kaya namin ilabas* within and beyond our limitations”
>
> ALLAN “BORDS” BURDEOS, DRUMMER

to *Billboard Philippines*, with Burdeos noting how this showcases their confidence and trust in the potential contribution of each member.

“‘Yun na rin siguro ‘yung maganda [with Juggernaut], *na, kahit* from different metal bands *‘yung pinanggalingan namin, walang nagsasabi na, ‘Dapat ganitong* style *ng* music *tayo!’ So, parang, nagko-*collaborate *talaga kami sa isa’t isa,”* affirms Linao.

Adding to this, Dela Cruz shares, *“Natuwa rin kasi ako na may nag-*comment *na walang katunog. Na hindi katunog ng ginagawa ko o ginagawa nila, ng mga pinanggalingan namin. May ibang mai-o-offer. Bago sa pandinig.”*

ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

When comparing their experiences with their other bands and with Juggernaut, the members note similarities, differences, and even important lessons they’ve gained over the years that have aided in their time with this new band.

For Rodrigo, he notes how also being in Vie not only challenges him in a technical sense to differentiate his plan of attack with his vocals, but also helps him find inspiration as well. In particular, with how supportive his band members in Vie are with him being in Juggernaut.

Dela Cruz, meanwhile, shares how he has been making the time to relearn certain skills he used to utilize back in the day. He notes that, with how busy they are as adults, particularly with taking care of their families, getting to play and go into the studio just makes him all the more excited.

In Lumanlan’s case, he notes how being the primary songwriter in Arcadia has helped him enjoy the collaborative dynamic the members of Juggernaut possess. He shares how he found himself and his abilities tested and elevated by the like-minded artistic visions of the other members.

For Linao, he emphasizes the importance of the discipline in Juggernaut, which both him and Burdeos applied from their time in Kamikazee. *“Kaya nakakatuwa rin ‘yung disiplina namin sa isa’t isa pagdating sa* songwriting. *Walang pataasan ng ihi. Walang pataasan ng* pride,” he shares.

Similarly, this continued discipline has also aided in, as Burdeos shares, easily laying out the road map of the band, which the members’ other respective bands also implement with certain levels of flexibility to account for unforeseen circumstances. *“May nasusundan na kami agad na* plans… *‘Yung* training *namin sa* ‘Kazee, actually, three years *lagi ang* road map. *Naka-plano na ‘yun. Kailangan masundan namin ‘yun.”*

NEW BAND, NEW TRICKS

On the other hand, the five members also note the lessons they’ve learned from their time in Juggernaut and how they’ve been able to apply them to their other bands.

For Lumanlan, with newfound enjoyment from constantly collaborating with fellow songwriters, he was now encouraging his co-members in Arcadia to do the same in order to help them add even more depth and dimension to their already intense brand of hardcore.

Burdeos and Linao resonate with this, noting how collaborating with other musicians aside from their main band is like having more friends to have fun with, which, effectively, in their case, makes them even more excited when they play together with Kamikazee.

Meanwhile, for Dela Cruz, he discovered the simple joy of finding a much-needed break from routine following decades of consistently playing almost the same material with Skychurch, providing him an all-new, fulfilling musical experience.

In Rodrigo’s case, it was the heightened level of professionalism he adapted to. Here, he observes the importance of the work ethic his bandmates in Juggernaut have cultivated over the years, inspiring him to bring the same kind of ethos to Vie, especially in terms of tackling their future plans.

THE SECRET TO COLLABORATION

When asked what they believe to be the key to a great collaboration, the members of Juggernaut share the essentials they’ve gathered from experience over the years.

Alongside, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of each collaborator and maintaining respect, ultimately, they agree that it all boils down to one important factor — friendship.

The band notes that, next to skill level, it is of importance that the people you intend on making music with are people you can actually get along with. *“Mas okay na kumuha ka ng miyembro na hindi ganun kagalingan pero okay makisama kaysa sa sobrang galing naman pero sobrang laki rin ng ulo,”* states Linao.

WHAT’S NEXT

Beyond the confines of the band, Juggernaut has also notably been working with other musicians as well.

In particular, the quintet has already released two collaborative singles in the form of “Battle Born” with Mikki Jill (Fiona, Kamikazee) and “Warpath” with Migs Palispis (Fell The Mighty, Armalite). As the band looks ahead towards the rest of 2025, the members reveal that even more heavy-hitting collaborations are on the way, including a track with both Niko Cezar (Fragments) and Audie Avenido (Greyhoundz), as well as one with Henry Allen (Faspitch).

In relation to this, the band also shares plans of aiming to complete a debut album in the works. In addition, the members also reveal that they are set to go on a joint tour with Fragments sometime later this year, expressing their excitement.

SUPERGROUP (?)

Undeniably, with the caliber, reputation, and influence each member of the band holds, it’s inevitable that Juggernaut and their music would be subject to much anticipation from longtime purveyors of the Filipino heavy music scene, with many going as far to even label the band as a metal “supergroup.”

However, at the end of the day, this is not how the members see nor consider themselves. The way they see it, at the heart of it all, they are just five good friends who started a band. *“Nag-ja-jive kami* but not to the extent *na iniisip namin na* “supergroup” *kami,”* remarks Linao on their chemistry as a band. *“Talagang parang lang kaming magbabarkada na bumuo ng banda.”*

For them, ultimately, it’s all about their love for their craft, as Burdeos himself states, “*‘Yung* goal *ng* Juggernaut is to create the best possible music *na kaya namin ilabas* within and beyond our limitations.”

PHOTOS BY KRIS ROCHA AND ERRON OCAMPO

Sonic Sisterhood: The Women of *TANAW*

Barbie Almalbis, Kitchie Nadal, Aia De Leon, Hannah Romawac, Lougee Basabas, and Acel Bisa reprise their successful 2022 shows and celebrate their one-of-a-kind camaraderie

BY ROME SAENZ

COLLABORATION COMES EASY IN OPM — especially if it's among artists and peers who have inspired, influenced, and supported each other throughout their musical journeys. On February 9 at the Newport Performing Arts Theater, Filipino rock and alternative legends Acel Bisa, Aia De Leon, Barbie Almalbis, Hannah Romawac, Kitchie Nadal, and Lougee Basabas are joining forces again to celebrate their ongoing legacy in music through a joint concert dubbed *TANAW: The Repeat.* On this exciting stage, these veteran artists seek a reiteration of their past concerts, *TANAW* and *TANAWIN*, which were both held in 2022. Having worked on these collaborative performances in the past, camaraderie comes just as naturally as anything to these women.

In an exclusive interview with *Billboard Philippines*, Aia De Leon shared the origin story behind the power lineup — a "funny" direct message streak between her and Hannah Romawac of SessiOnroad. One thing led to another, and a girls' brunch eventually spawned this fully female roster of icons.

Collaboration within OPM is one of the many ways in which bayanihan takes form in the land of the arts. The naturally synergetic nature of Filipinos carves a path where artists work together more seamlessly, and more enthusiastically. In performances, this doesn't just involve those on stage, but members of the audience as well. Adding to this, Kitchie Nadal noted, "One of my favorite memories from the 2022 *TANAW* was performing our old hit songs from the first album and seeing how open the audience was to our new sound, including the new song 'Lahat' [that] we introduced. That connection with the crowd while performing something fresh is definitely something I'm looking forward to reliving in this upcoming concert." She adds, "The audience's energy, combined with our connection to them, influences the vibe, creating a unique and spontaneous experience."

Nevertheless, with so many OPM legends decorating the stage for *TANAW*, one might find themselves worrying that too many cooks may just spoil the broth. However, for these ladies, it does not seem to be the case. De Leon explains, "We have had the pleasure of each other's company in different settings, so there is comfort in familiarity. And then apart from each other we have also had the season of taking care of other people, so we already have the rhythm of service in our daily lives."

Sounding off from a similar beat, Acel Bisa shared that the group took their individualities as creatives to instead curate a performance that is entirely unique and yet cohesive. "We make sure that everyone's unique voice has a spotlight, and that every voice is assigned to how we'll make the song in its best output," she explains. "For example, my voice is lighter, so I usually sing the higher octave or do the higher second voice to blend with those who have a thicker and lower tone."

Rather than simply reliving the memories and nostalgia of their music that came out in the past, the women of *TANAW* seek to show the artists' individual growth and evolution as a unit. Following their string of collaborations onstage, the group had also recorded and released an original song together — "TALINGHAGA" — in 2023, which they plan to perform live for the first time in this year's show.

Through teaming up in this manner, Lougee Basabas of Mojofly attributed a lot of her growth to their joint songwriting. She states, "Barbie has given me a lot of guitar playing and gear tips. Hannah's and Aia's vocal techniques have always been influential to my singing. Acel and Kitchie's songwriting have made a huge impact on how I write as well. They always have nuggets of wisdom to impart in every situation." She added that, more than co-performers, her fellow members in *TANAW* provide a fun and nurturing environment for their team. With constructive criticism and feedback coming from each member, their friendship as a unit is validated with an honest desire for growth.

As the ate (older sister) figures for the up-and-coming artists of OPM today, the women of *TANAW* are passing the torch to younger musicians to keep the community alive — especially with the prevalence of digital streaming and social media. Their sentiment calls out to keep the legacy of Filipino music going, all while giving it an international platform. "Stay authentic — your unique voice will set you apart," advises Hannah Romawac. "Use digital platforms to share your music globally, but always remember the heart of OPM. You're shaping its future while honoring its legacy."

> **"We have had the pleasure of each other's company in different settings, so there is comfort in familiarity"**
> AIA DE LEON

Left to right: Lougee Basabas, Aia De Leon, Hannah Romawac, Barbie Almalbis, Kitchie Nadal, Acel Bisa

Beyond Borders

The BINI and Agnez Mo remix of "Cherry On Top" is just one of the many global collaborations that have redefined the possibilities of Filipino music

BY IAN URRUTIA

MUSIC COLLABORATIONS WORK BEST when artists who, on paper, seem worlds apart surprisingly complement each other and produce a piece of work that transcends the sum of its parts. While most creative partnerships are strategically engineered to tap into shared fanbases and drive career growth, it's worth noting how chemistry sometimes moves in mysterious ways, proving that the most unlikely pairings can bypass preconceived ideas of what should or shouldn't work.

Take, for instance, "Cherry On Top (BiniMo Remix)." While both BINI and Agnez Mo reign as current trailblazers in their respective countries, their cultural backgrounds and generational divides couldn't be more distinct. BINI, a Filipino pop supergroup in their early twenties, exploded onto the scene in the past few years with a string of blockbuster hits. Agnez Mo, on the other hand, is a 38-year-old Indonesian music icon and award-winning actress who has already shared the stage with some of the biggest international artists. Despite these apparent disparities, the remix thrives on an unexpected and effortless synergy, blending BINI's youthful aura with Agnez Mo's seasoned charisma. In a pop landscape where many of their chart peers fall into predictable patterns, this union delivers a much-needed dose of reprieve: an audacious blend of distinct voices that redefine what's possible in pop music today.

THE COUNTRY'S R&B QUEEN MEETS A NEW WAVE ICON

Looking back in history, some of the most remarkable collaborations between local and international artists are those whose style and branding align seamlessly, like a perfectly tailored suit. These partnerships don't scream particularly contrived at all; it

BINI AND AGNEZ MO COMPOSITE COURTESY OF AMO ENTERTAINMENT AND ABS-CBN MUSIC, PHOTOGRAPHED BY SHAIRA LUNA AND EDITED BY FRANCINE AMOR. KYLA PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAULO CABUHAT. ARMI MILLARE PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. ENA MORI PHOTO COURTESY OF OFFSHORE MUSIC.

Kyla

just makes sense to put both personalities together in a song regardless of where they come from. One such standout is Kyla, now regarded as the R&B queen of the Philippines. During her prime, Kyla's soulful voice became a coveted asset for global music acts eager to make their mark in the Philippine music market. Over the years, she has lent her voice to artists like American R&B singer-songwriter Brian McKnight and British boy band Blue, soaring on top of towering choruses and glossy productions, all while maintaining finesse. However, beyond her chart-topping collaborations, Kyla's lesser-known duets also deserve equal recognition. In 2022, she joined forces with Fra Lippo Lippi for the sophisti-pop gem "Wish We Were Two," which channels a distinctly '80s retro vibe. For this collaboration, the "Hanggang Ngayon" songstress showcased an intuitive understanding that the heart of a great song lies in storytelling. With Fra Lippo Lippi vocalist Per Sorensen, she embraced subtle showmanship that didn't rely on theatrics but rather on a shared connection. It's a performance that remains criminally underrated, highlighting Kyla's versatility and her ability to elevate any duet with grace and sincerity.

ARMI MILLARE: NO STRANGER TO COLLABS

This same level of chameleonic advantage is passed along to artists like Armi Millare, whose vocal style has inspired a new generation of singers who don't necessarily fit the typical power belter or alt-pop mold. As the former frontwoman of UDD (Up Dharma Down), her voice was a key element that defined the band's distinct sound. Armi's versatility and skill have allowed her to transcend genres, seamlessly collaborating with artists like Paul Buchanan, the legendary frontman of Scottish band The Blue Nile. Their poignant duet, "Feelings," is a masterclass in emotional restraint, depicting a couple grappling with a realization that their relationship is nearing its end. Unlike many songs that layer on complexities, "Feelings" cuts straight to the heart with its stark honesty, even as the characters in the song search for a sense of closure amidst the growing distance. It's a stellar track in UDD's third album, *Capacities*, with its quiet melancholy made all the more resonant by its sense of openness — an emotional freedom that paradoxically feels infinite despite its introspective nature.

Even after her departure from UDD, Armi remains intentionally selective about the work she shares with the public. One of the captivating pieces in her solo repertoire is "Lykkelig," a minimalist club track with Norwegian group D'Sound. Here, Armi brings her entrancing pipes to the dancefloor, while D'Sound's understated groove creates an intoxicating rhythm that deepens with every listen. Armi and D'Sound would go on to create more songs in a similar vein, each track a study in nuanced style. But with "Run For Cover," they push the envelope further, leaving a lasting impression long after the song fades.

Armi Millare

THE NEW GENERATION OF GLOBAL COLLABORATION: ENA MORI AND MORE

While some collaborations may be dismissed as strategic attempts to reach new fans in other territories and explore opportunities that are completely absent in one's home country, the rise of the Internet and the accessibility of recording technology have made it more convenient than ever to defy geographical limitations.

> "Today, artists can easily work together with peers from across the globe, a move that was once out of reach"

Today, artists can easily work together with peers from across the globe, a move that was once out of reach. Recent collaborations have demonstrated the possibility of this new mode of linkage. One prominent example is the critically acclaimed 2024 album, *Scattersun*, a joint project between Korean shoegaze darling Parannoul and electronic music collective Fax Gang, whose vocalist PK Shellboy is a Filipino. Lauded by international music publications, the album received glowing praise from *Pitchfork* for its "contrasting textures" and sense of dynamism, cementing it as one of the most compelling releases of last year.

And then there are a few others that not only captivate but leave you wondering why they haven't received widespread attention. Ena Mori's collaboration with Japanese producer Tomggg on "Nante ne" is pure chef's kiss, while Filipina drag superstar Marina Summers' partnership with *Ru Paul's Drag Race Canada vs. The World* Season 2 winner Lemon on the track "Pool Party" is nothing short of unhinged raver behavior — the good kind. These collaborations, though not necessarily made for mainstream spotlight, embody the potential for cross-cultural musical exchange.

While there are certainly more examples to explore, one thing is clear: collaborations between local and international artists are here to stay. And regardless of their initial purpose and intent, they have proven to be powerful vehicles for innovation, offering new possibilities for both artists and listeners alike.

Ena Mori

Photographed January 2025
at the Billboard Philippines
Studio in Pasig.

Styling by Daryl Chang,
assisted by Kurt Abonal &
Connie Ulep.

On KZ: JOSEPH PALMA
jacket and jeans
On TJ: MARTIN UY jeans;
LEVI'S ® PHILIPPINES jacket

A Love Song for the Ages:
The Story of TJ Monterde and KZ Tandingan

The OPM power couple opens up about how their real-life romance inspired one of the Philippines' most beloved duets — and one another

BY GABRIEL SAULOG

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KARL KING AGUÑA

In life, there is no greater collaboration than the dynamic of marriage.

Marriage itself is like a song of its own — composed of its own fine-tuned melodies that translate into a harmony of elements that's akin to what makes a relationship work. And if there's a duo who would know all about both themes, it would be TJ Monterde and KZ Tandingan.

While both parties have forged their own respective career paths and established their own set of sounds, their worlds came together for the release of a special rendition to TJ's chart-topping hit single, "Palagi." As a reimagining of sorts, their duet version of the track was more than just a song, but a testament to their relationship that exemplifies a perfect harmony of their individual artistry and their shared love.

What started out as an Instagram livestream showcase soon evolved into a fully-recorded song released in late August last year, and was met with widespread acclaim (even claiming the No. 1 spot on *Billboard Philippines*' Top Philippine Songs chart) — uniting fans across generations and musical preferences. Yet for TJ and KZ, however, it was far more personal.

"A lot of people wondered about a possible duet version of this song," TJ reflects. "But the only condition I had was that if I would do a duet, it had to be with her — because this song is about her. And now, it's so nice since we're sharing this song together."

On KZ: JOSEPH PALMA jacket and jeans
On TJ: MARTIN UY jacket and jeans; LEVI'S ® PHILIPPINES jacket

> "We are two different artists. We approach our sounds very differently. So to find the sweet spot in those two worlds, it was a really big challenge"
>
> KZ TANDINGAN

Before their paths intertwined professionally, both TJ and KZ lived in two very different musical worlds. TJ, an acoustic balladeer from Cagayan de Oro, built a career on heartfelt melodies and poetic lyrics. KZ, on the other hand, was a force of nature. After winning *The X Factor Philippines* in 2012, she emerged as "Asia's Soul Supreme," known for her fearless experimentation with the genres of jazz, R&B, and hip-hop. Yet together, what they've created places an emphasis on a genuine set of emotions rather than one distinct genre.

"Even though we're married, we are two different artists. We approach our sounds very differently. So to find the sweet spot in those two worlds, it was a really big challenge — especially for me. Because 'Palagi' was already a really big song at that time. And I was so scared to touch it because I told [TJ] that I didn't want it to sound like we just forced it to happen," says KZ. "Even if I'm the one who will ride the song, it's also very important to me that it had to represent both of us and the underlying story of the song. That's how challenging it was."

Although the original version of "Palagi" was a simple yet poignant ode to enduring love (with TJ himself describing it as something that encapsulates "young love"), he also views this brand-new rendition as a song that has "already been through something" thanks to its lived-in

CREATIVE AND FASHION DIRECTION BY DARYL CHANG. ART DIRECTION BY NICOLE ALMERO. HAIR BY JAYMAR LAHAYLAHAY (TJ & KZ). MAKEUP BY HERNAN SORIANO (TJ). MAKEUP BY JANICA CLETO (KZ). PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTED BY ROJAN MAGUYON & RUBY PEDREGOSA. PRODUCED BY MIKAELA CRUZ.

qualities, and a symbol that emphasizes "We're still here, together."

From what anyone has seen, the result was nothing short of magical. KZ's soul-inflected riffs and phrasing elevated the song's emotional depth, while TJ's steady acoustic backdrop anchored it in with warmth and familiarity. Their voices, though distinct, merged effortlessly — creating a rendition that feels both timeless and refreshingly modern.

"I feel like I was there to add depth and texture to the moments that matter the most. In taking this role, I should be the one who supports whatever I do, and there were parts of the song that I needed to change to fit my range. It's TJ's original key. So, when I play it as is, either the voice is too low, or when I play it in a higher octave, it's too much like a grand finals performance," KZ notes with a playful tune.

"I took it really seriously and I wanted to be careful. I didn't want to overdo it but at the same time, I wanted my addition to be something that meant something new to the song."

TJ also mentions how upon hearing the first draft from the studio, it was already pitch-perfect in terms of execution. "When I heard it the first time, upon the first pass, I [already] said, 'That's perfect.' We didn't repeat it nor did we need to. It didn't surprise me but my expectations were like, this is exactly what I wanted to hear. And that's what you heard on the final recording," he proudly says.

The success of their beloved duet wasn't just about musical synergy — it was also a reflection of their real-life dynamic. As a married couple, TJ and KZ have always been open about their journey, from their whirlwind courtship to their intimate wedding during the pandemic in 2020. Their relationship, much like their music, is built on mutual respect and an unshakeable sense of partnership.

"I think the key component of what made this work was respect *talaga*. You allow each other to shine, and of course, you get to find that mutual ground where both of you shine and *nakikita ng isa't isa na nag*-grow. And I think *yung nire*-represent *ng* duet [is] how these two very different people can meet in the middle and make it work like it was meant to be all along," mentions KZ.

On KZ: UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON sweater; ADIDAS footwear
On TJ: UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON sweater and shorts

Still, the duo notes that their inspiration for one another carries over beyond what they have been able to accomplish with the song. Their methodology, whether it's in their songwriting process or approach to live performances, is an amalgamation of their sway on one another.

"Every time I perform with her, it excites me. But at the same time, *parang nacha*-challenge ako," says TJ. "I consider myself more of a songwriter, so *sa kanya ako nagpapatulong para makahanap ng magandang* direction for a song, or *kahit para makahanap kung anong* run *ang pwedeng gawin sa mga kanta ko*."

With his penned compositions, he notes how he's the type of songwriter to find inspiration for his work –– even if it means he has to get in the zone. "'*Yung kantang nag*-resonate *sa maraming tao*, like 'Palagi,' it's something that you can't get from your brain kasi. For me, if you want to write something that really resonates with a lot of people, it's something that has to be felt authentically."

In channeling such authenticity, TJ mentions that he finds himself drawn to finding experiences — whether it be sensory or through reliving stories from his peers or his own past. "What I [often] do, I try to call people, talk to friends, or sometimes open our cabinets in this room. I smell a certain perfume, or I read *'yung mga* letters *namin ni* KZ *dati*, sometimes revisiting old videos — all of which brings me back to a certain time. Because I try to find something that can make me feel."

He recalls a recent instance during their trip to Korea over the holidays, wherein the two of them returned to the very spot where KZ accepted his marriage proposal. "When we got there, all those feelings from long ago came back again. Like I couldn't believe we were here ten years ago. So that sparked something again, and I went straight to write down my notes because I didn't have an instrument [with me]. I wrote everything I wanted to say and felt because it's those moments with her that inspired me to write something new," TJ continues.

On the other hand, KZ notes how TJ's mere presence has changed her approach to her craft — including how she views it, and how she has moved forward with her artistry. "For me, TJ always makes everything easier. I'm very much into the tiny details of every performance and every arrangement, so sometimes I overthink everything — yet TJ is the one who reminds me to just allow life to happen in front of you."

"*Sobrang* strength *ni* TJ '*yung* he is very in touch with his emotions. He allows all his senses to be open, to be receptive to all the inspiration *na nasa paligid niya. Kaya, andami niyang nakukuhang mga bagay na pwedeng maging* inspiration *sa sulat niya. Kasi ganun siyang klaseng tao.*"

"He always finds the silver lining in all those situations, which, [as cheesy as it sounds,] is what I need every single day of my life. So, despite how different we are as people and artists, it makes sense that we balance each other out."

KZ then tells me all about how TJ got her out of her creative rut, citing how he's allowed her to step out of her comfort zone, both in terms of her genre and songwriting styles. "For the longest time, I didn't get to release a song and I felt like I was stuck. But it was TJ who helped me."

"*Sabi niya*, 'Why don't you write something completely left field [from] whatever you want to write? Just for you to hit restart and be jolted creatively first.' Because back then, I was overloaded," she narrates. "Then I wrote ["Toyo"] out of desperation. It started out as an exercise for me to write something and then he encouraged me to release it — and I'm still laughing because I think it's the first time that I've written something like this!"

Although the duo could go on and on about the significant impact they've made on one another, what fascinates the couple is how quickly their duet became a sensation. Fans flooded social media with heartfelt reactions, calling it "the love song of the decade" and praising its ability to bridge generations.

"This is something I never imagined. I've been in this industry for about 13 years, but I still get surprised when someone messages me about how much our song has affected them," TJ muses. "Like three days ago, we were in a restaurant in QC, and someone suddenly came up to us, saying, 'I'm really sorry to bother you, but your song helped me and my girlfriend a lot.' Like it was their theme song *daw*. So seeing it resonate with people *na ganun*, that's my happiness. I'll always be happy with that."

Given its surge in popularity amongst the masses, their collaboration has led to more opportunities for them to collaborate with one another, whether it's in TJ's upcoming *Sariling Mundo* concert series, or even their upcoming world tour around the United States and Canada.

"I'm so grateful every time we fly out for a gig, and that we get to do back-to-back shows as KZ and TJ. We're so in awe of what's happening. But the fact that you get to do it side by side with your husband — that you get to travel the world, meet people, do the thing that you love the most, with the person that you love the most — it feels like an extension of our honeymoon," she jokes.

TJ acknowledges the joy in sharing the stage together, but he still notes his awe when watching her perform alone. "Whenever she does her sets, I don't stay backstage. I'm just there watching in the corner, because the experience you get from her is different every single time. And that's how I learn so much from her, as in literal Coach KZ *talaga siya sa buhay ko,*" he playfully shares.

For both of them, the journey of creating this brand new rendition of "Palagi" has only deepened their bond. The experience has taught them to listen more, compromise better, and appreciate the beauty in each other's differences.

"It's funny how a song can teach you so much," TJ reflects. "It's taught me *na* I want to focus more not just on my career, but maybe future highlights in life. *Parang kung ano mang pwede pang mangyari sa buhay namin — katulad ng mga* anniversaries to come, or *kailan magkakaroon kami ng* family *namin*. That's a highlight because that's where I'll draw inspiration from, then I can write more."

With how their collaboration has inspired them to dream bigger, they've hinted at more projects in store for one another in the future, such as a new album from KZ and several more songs from TJ. But for now, they're content to enjoy the ride, grateful for the music — and the love — that brought them here.

"Overall, I'm just really grateful for the entire journey and I'm excited for whatever the future has in store for me and TJ," says KZ.

As the final notes of "Palagi" fade into the night, TJ and KZ share a knowing smile — and a mutual acknowledgement that the power of their love is what emphasizes the power of their collaboration. For them, the song is more than just a melody — it's a shared promise. A promise to keep singing, keep creating, and keep loving one another, always.

Because in the end, that's what "Palagi" is all about: a love that endures, in music and in life. b

"I still get surprised when someone messages me about how much our song has affected them"

TJ MONTERDE

THE POWER OF LOVE
Despite originating from a random Instagram live session, their rendition of "Palagi" has made waves nationwide with credit to its authenticity and lived-in nature

On KZ: FATIMA BELTRAN blazer and trousers; H&M bra top and boots
On TJ: ULYSSES CARAGAYAN blazer and trousers

PHILIPPINES
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The Biggest Songs in the Country
Every Wednesday

See the full charts

billboard PHILIPPINES
TOP SONGS

The All-Filipino Music Chart
Every Wednesday

See the full charts

Each Other's Favorites: Jason Dhakal And DENȲ

Two of contemporary R&B's rising stars come together and go outside of their comfort zones to craft everyone's "Favorite Song"

BY ROME SAENZ

"Spontaneous," "seamless," and "comfortable" — these are some of the words DENȲ and Jason Dhakal used to describe their latest collaboration, "Favorite Song." The song doesn't shy away from its nature: it's laid-back, romantic, and undeniably sexy.

Chances are you've already encountered the two artists individually during casual listening, whether through stumbling across Jason Dhakal's viral OPM covers or DENȲ's addictive hits like "Gusto With Ya" or "Alam Ko Na." With their growing influence in the local R&B scene, their collaboration didn't just happen by chance — they were friends beforehand.

In an exclusive interview with *Billboard Philippines*, DENȲ disclosed that prior to even meeting him, Jason Dhakal was someone she'd long admired: "I think it was around 2018 when I first heard his music and I was super impressed and I really wanted to work with him someday. *Pero, nung time na 'yun,* I wasn't DENȲ yet." Their eventual collaboration, to her, was a "full circle moment."

On Dhakal's end, teaming up for "Favorite song" made them closer, not just as co-workers, but as friends. Not only in writing and recording the song itself, but also preparing the promotional activities fostered their bond even stronger. "Me and her are very alike; We love *Drag Race*, we love NewJeans, we love really fun things, and we just talk about anything, you know?" He adds, "We can talk about anything! It's so interesting."

A shared love for K-pop and *Drag Race* aren't the only things that bind these two artists together — their songwriting processes also aligned. Dhakal started writing music in his early teens. "I had to do it. There were so many things happening in my life that I needed an outlet to

PAIR PHOTOS AND JASON DHAKAL SOLO PHOTO COURTESY OF WARNER MUSIC PHILIPPINES. DENȲ SOLO PHOTO COURTESY OF VIVA RECORDS CORP.

express how I was feeling at that time as a teenager," he explains.

On this note, both artists use music as an outlet to express their purest emotions, unafraid of audience reception. DENȲ says, "I don't really pressure myself on thinking about, 'What will my audience think about this message?'" She explained how, when initially writing her hit track "Gusto With Ya," her focus was on her values around relationships. When the song came out, she was taken aback by its sudden popularity and how listeners connected with her songwriting.

As two prominent voices in the OPM R&B scene, collaborations don't come easily for them. DENȲ prides herself on being selective about collaborations. "I think I need to like them as a person and as an artist. Because as much as everyone's taste is different, a collaboration or a song needs to fit my taste for me to be able to work on it," she admits. "I've tried writing songs that I didn't really fall in love with."

Dhakal also tends to collaborate more with producers and guitarists than with fellow artists. "Something I've learned from collaborating with artists is understanding how their brain works," he shares. Working with others has helped him become more intentional about his craft.

For "Favorite Song," Dhakal was the one who first proposed the idea alongside producer LUSTBASS. The producer had crafted the beats years prior, and when Jason first heard the track, he immediately envisioned DENȲ being part of it. DENȲ's experience echoes this sentiment: "When I heard the production, I knew it was something we could bring to life. *Bagay siya sa 'kin, bagay siya kay* Jason."

"Favorite Song" is another highlight in Jason Dhakal's growing collection of collaborations with Manila-based producer LUSTBASS. After seven years of working together, their dynamic has become second nature. "I can talk to him about anything," he divulges about his partnership with LUSTBASS. "It's innate."

When speaking about the process behind "Favorite Song," Dhakal describes the vibe as 'bedroom,' perfect for sharing with loved ones. "I just made that song because that's the mood I was in at the time," he cheekily confesses.

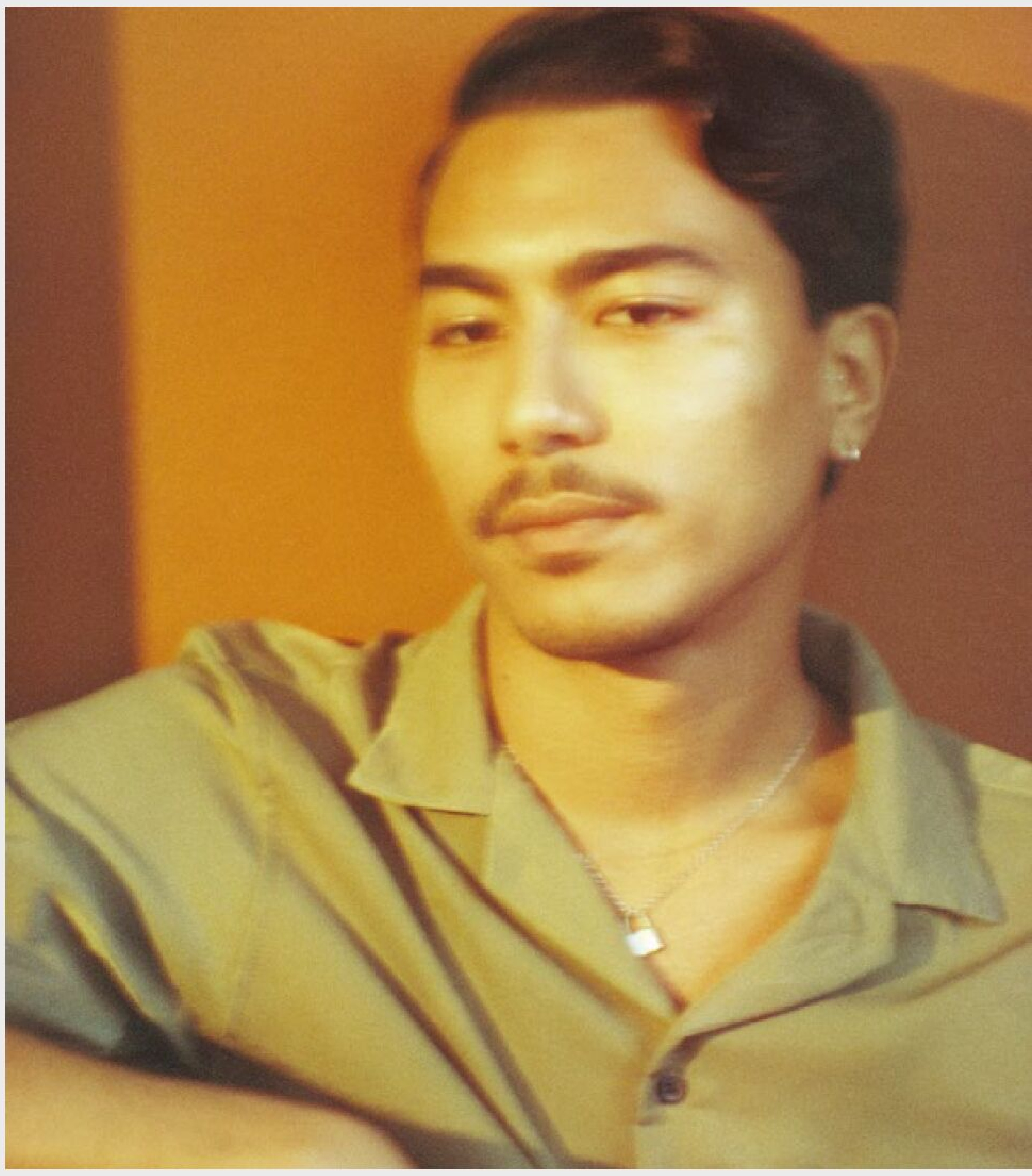
For DENȲ, the project allowed her to explore expressing sensuality in her music. "I have to admit, I still struggle on that side. It doesn't reflect much in my music, that type of theme," she says. Nevertheless, the track opened new doors for her: "It's something super normal and wonderful, you know, when done correctly. Especially as a woman who grew up in a very conservative country, it's hard to express that you can be sensual without people assuming the worst."

The project also pushed Dhakal out of his comfort zone, as he tackled writing in Tagalog for the first time. Born and raised in Oman, his music has mostly been written in English. This time, he enlisted DENȲ's help with the Tagalog lyrics. "I remember just being like, 'Okay, what do you think of this line and this line in English?' And she would translate it to fit the melody and flow best," he recalls. The duo frequently went back-and-forth on texts and refined the lyrics together.

Gaining confidence in writing Tagalog lyrics, Dhakal adds, "This was a good start for me… Now, I can write Tagalog things, and you'll hear that in upcoming projects." Hinting at future releases, DENȲ confirmed that this is just the beginning — she estimates that at least five collaborations will drop this year alone.

Although DENȲ and Jason Dhakal are already celebrated names in the local R&B scene, "Favorite Song" became a learning ground for both singer-songwriters, pushing them out of their comfort zones and elevating their artistry to new heights. **b**

> **"Something I've learned from collaborating with artists is understanding how their brain works"**
>
> JASON DHAKAL



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF KARENCITTA

Coming Full Circle: Karencitta And Nik Kho

The Bisaya hip-hop artists team up for "Dali Na Ba," a collaboration that has been seven years in the making

BY KARA ANGAN

When you're a veteran artist like Karencitta or Nik Kho from Midnasty, it's easy to think that you've seen all that the music industry has to offer. Nik Kho, who performs as part of the hip-hop trio Midnasty, has been making music for over 20 years. On the other hand, you have Karencitta, who blew up in 2017 with the release of the viral "Cebuana."

They've all had their fair share of hits — Karencitta with tracks like "BamBamBam" and "No Apology," and Midnasty with "Ilongga," "Lame," and "Daguit," to name a few. Over the years, the two acts have established themselves as prominent hip-hop and R&B acts that are bringing Bisaya music to the mainstream.

Even though it seems that they've reached the highest of highs in their respective careers, both Karencitta and Midnasty continue to prove that there are still ways to evolve as artists, no matter how long you've had your skin in the game. For Karencitta, funnily enough, evolving meant returning to her roots as an independent artist. In 2024, she announced that she was leaving her label and charting her own path in music.

"I've been through so many labels and managements, and I thought that each management would be different. I mean, they are, but I realized that at the end of the day, I'm more comfortable as an independent artist," Karencitta shared to *Billboard Philippines*, in a mix of Bisaya and English. "I know what I want, why I want it, and how I'm going to get it. As an independent artist, I have full creative control."

That's the part that she loves — having full ownership over her art ("which is the bare minimum!" she exclaims). Karencitta threw herself into the making of *CITTA*, her first full-length release since going independent. It felt thrilling, she shares, she could finally write songs that felt authentic to her life experiences, she could finally have a say in how her songs are created, marketed, and distributed, and she could finally work with whoever producer and artist she wanted to work with.

While CITTA featured collaborations she had already released as singles, like "Jusko" featuring Skusta Clee, and "Anoona" featuring Nik Makino and Cursebox, the record also featured a track that was seven years in the making: "Dali Na Ba," with none other than her longtime friend Nik Kho.

The duo first recorded the track in August of 2017. However, it wasn't until last year that Kho, after seeing the long-forgotten track nestled among the files on his computer, asked Karencitta if it was time to release it. The 2017 version of "Dali Na Ba" was completely different — Kho's verse was completely different, and the beat for the track reflected the popular sounds of 2017. He rewrote and rerecorded his verse, and the duo also decided that they wanted a more modern production to bring the track into the 2020s. Then, in 2024, Karencitta crossed paths with rising Cebuano producer Ronnie Villa, and everything just clicked.

"Kuntento kayko with Ronnie Villa (I was very content with Ronnie Villa)," Karencitta says, when reflecting on what it was like working with the well-sought-after producer. "*Kasabot siya sa akong* vision (He understood my vision)."

Kho went on to reveal that even if it was his first time working directly with Villa, they were immediately impressed by the young producer's work ethic and drive. *"Kuha*

> **"We make art to inspire, to illuminate, to juxtapose, and to connect with people. Why should we hide it?"**
>
> KARENCITTA

DALI NA BA
The duo's collaboration serves as a testament to their evolution as artists over the years

man niya dayon ang vibe (He was able to immediately get the vibe we were going for)."

While it wasn't an easy road to completion — Kho reveals that Villa sent back around ten drafts, given Karencitta's very hands-on attitude to the song — the final result was more than just a song; it was a reflection of their evolution as artists over the past seven years.

"We make art to inspire, to illuminate, to juxtapose, and to connect with people," Karencitta muses. "Why should we hide it?"

In a way, it served as a stronger push for the duo to release the track now. In fact, one of the reasons why the song was sidetracked in 2017 was because both Karencitta and Midnasty found themselves at an inflection point in their careers. Karencitta's "Cebuana" and Midnasty's "Lame" were picking up steam, with both songs charting on *MYX* at the time. The first version of Kho's verse also reflected a younger version of him as a person, where he rapped about working hard and trying to figure out his way through life. In his rerecorded version, he talks about being in a better place today compared to yesterday.

While Kho's verse and the overall production of the track had drastically changed, Karencitta didn't redo anything for the final version of the song. When she had written her parts for the song, they were reflective of what she had gone through during that time in her life. Even now, seven years after she first wrote those lyrics, the core of the song had stayed the same. Seven years later, it seems as if she had ended up back where she started — writing songs that felt authentic to her experiences and not just to get a radio hit.

More than just a testament to their evolution as artists, "Dali Na Ba" is also a testament to Kho and Karencitta's friendship over the years. "Without Nik's motivation and push [to release the song], I don't think it would've ever come out," Karencitta shares, in a mix of Bisaya and English.

"Nag-wait *ra mi* for the right time *sa kanta* (We waited for the right time to release the song)," Kho says.

Thank God that they did.

From Creators To Curators: The Diegos

Veteran indie rock musicians Diego Mapa and Diego Castillo channel their enduring love for music through DJ-ing

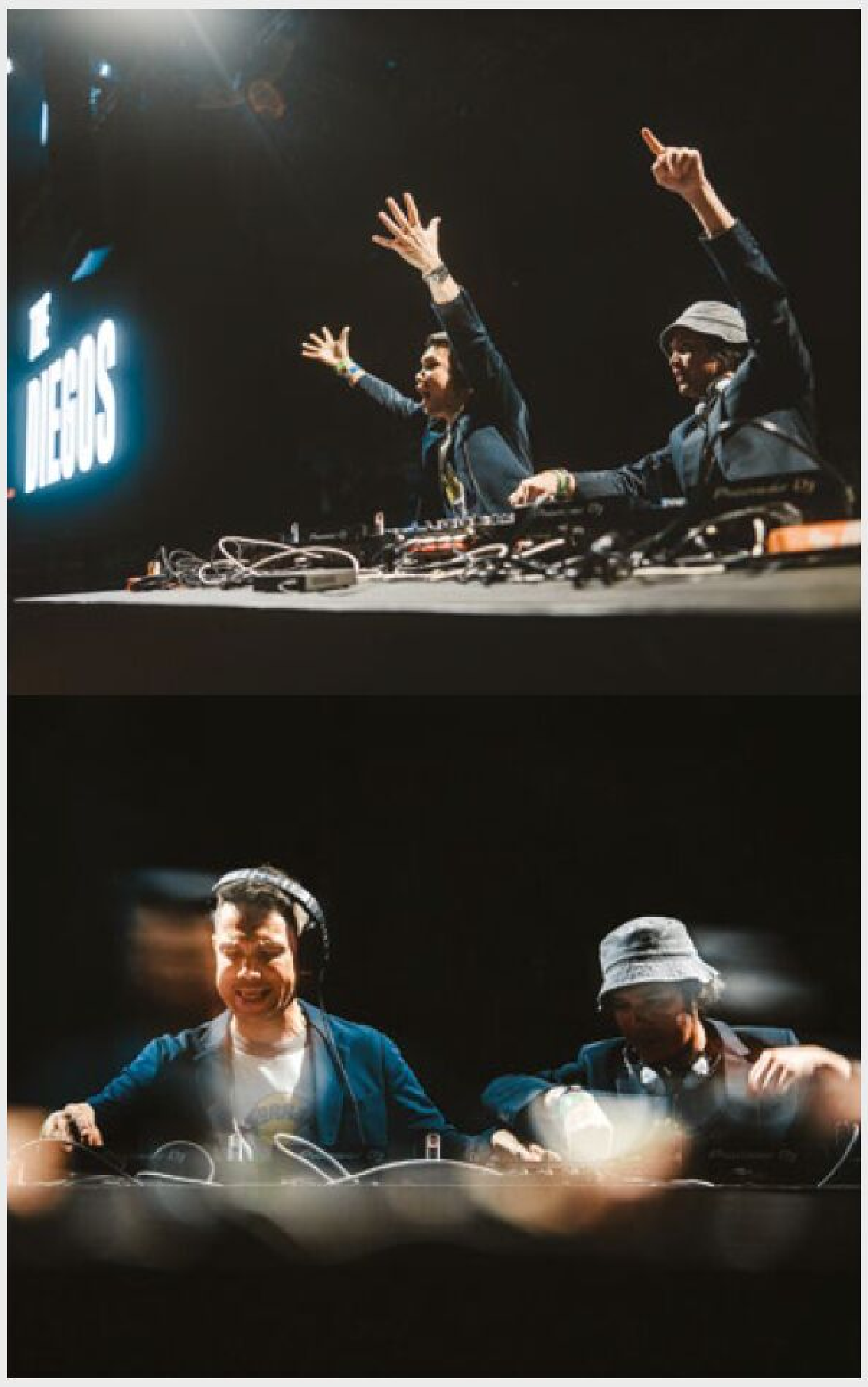
BY JASON CABALLA

AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, the cultural lines between musicians — who create, record, and perform music — and DJs — who curate a set of records by other artists to play at a party or an event — blurred significantly, with more and more “band people” attending recurrent dance parties like Fluxxe, which was held in various venues around the Bonifacio Global City and Makati areas in the mid-2000s.

Perhaps it was also the prevalence of postpunk-influenced, dancefloor-friendly, and ‘indie sleaze’-adjacent music that bands like The Rapture, Bloc Party, LCD Soundsystem, The Gossip, and the like coming out at the time, whose sound had also trickled into local indie acts like Pedicab, Taken By Cars, Duster, and more. Their songs would feature in many Fluxxe DJ sets to the point that they would outnumber the usual house, EDM, and techno tracks that DJs would typically play.

Among the regulars at Fluxxe were Diego Mapa — then a member of Pedicab, Monsterbot, and Cambio — and Sandwich guitarist Diego Castillo. Other than their band credentials, both have been known to be voracious consumers and collectors of music, each amassing an impressive amount of CDs and vinyl years before the so-called “resurgence” of the latter. It wouldn’t be long before each Diego tried his hand at DJing, and as they got better at it, both would end up being booked to play sets at Fluxxe on the same night quite frequently. “When we’re on the same bill, the text invites would evolve to, ‘Tonight: Kiki and Gian, and The Diegos,’” recalls Mapa. “That gave us the idea to join forces.”

The pair became formally known as The Diegos when they started doing a DJ night of their own with now-manager Jigger Divina, entitled Hey Boy, Hey Girl after the Chemical Brothers classic. Since then, The Diegos have spun at everything from club nights and weddings to corporate events and big concerts, even warming up the massive crowd at the last Eraserheads reunion show in 2022. Being fans of all kinds of music, their diverse record collections allow them to adapt their set to the venue and/or the audience, whether it likes hip-hop, soul, Manila Sound, ‘80s new wave, ‘70s funk, or ‘60s tropicalia.



Actually owning the records they play also adds a degree of sincerity to The Diegos’ DJ sets. When they spin, one can tell that they’re having a blast, also enjoying the music themselves, and frequently interacting with the crowd as they would while wearing guitars onstage with their respective bands. The Diegos’ sets are part dance party and part music appreciation class, where either one of them would give a wink of acknowledgement to anyone who recognizes or applauds the songs they play. “If the night is going our way, we try to introduce new music and also play relatable modern classics,” shares Mapa.

However, both Diegos are not vinyl purists by any means, although they prefer the medium if the venue has turntables. “Vinyl sounds better in a good sound system,” says Mapa.

“I do enjoy the act of using records more only because there is a bit more skill involved in doing it,” adds Castillo. “Also, I love the idea that I never know what DMaps (Mapa) will be playing, nor does he know what records I might have in my bag. With vinyl, I just react to the tracks [he] might play and vice versa.”

With vinyl being increasingly popular and more widely available, it’s hardly surprising that there are many more DJs that use the medium and offer a warmer, more analog alternative to the usual, run-of-the-mill digital music jocks. There’s the bike-riding Leisure collective (which includes UDD’s Ean Mayor), Cubao Expo’s Good Vibrations Records crew, Lourd De Veyra (whose brother Francis also spins records with Mapa’s Tarsius bandmate Jay Gapasin as Bignay Soundsystem), and Cebu’s Pawn Records curators Libya Montes and Nina Turtle, just to name a few. Of course, there are many who came before them, from Toti Dalmacion and his legendary Consortium parties, to DJ Arbie Won, who still spins at his popular Mandaluyong joint Treskul Records. The Diegos consider themselves as simply continuing the tradition of great vinyl DJing, but for them, it’s really not about the format itself.

“Playing music you love, of course, is the main reason one should DJ,” affirms Castillo. “Sharing tracks and songs that when strung together will make the audience feel or experience something that makes them either wanna dance or just happy is what I think a DJ should do. [It’s about] trying to somehow tell a story and setting up a vibe, so to speak.”

“I love the idea that I never know what DMaps will be playing, nor does he know what records I might have in my bag” DIEGO CASTILLO

UKAY COMPUTER

While Diego Mapa sells brand new vinyl via his online store Rosano Records, his love for thrift shops and second-hand records is legendary — hence his Instagram handle “@ukayslut”

PHOTOS BY IYA FORBES

Unexpected Magic: Zild Benitez and Tim Marquez

While they admit to not liking each other at first, the two young musicians/songwriters/producers could be responsible for a song you may have heard and loved

BY JASON CABALLA

THEY'RE NOT EXACTLY BANDMATES in the formal sense — at least not at the moment — but young musicians Zild Benitez and Tim Marquez are practically two peas in a pod; if you see one of them at a show, then you're bound to bump into the other.

On their own, they're both men of many hats. Zild is the erstwhile bassist and singer of the celebrated (and dormant) pop/funk/rock band IV of Spades and is currently a solo artist (with four LPs to his name) who also produces other acts on the side. Tim is the drummer and songwriter for One Click Straight — a band he shares with brothers Sam and Toffer, plus guitarist Joel Cartera — and has produced (or co-produced with Sam) recordings by the likes of Ena Mori, Ben&Ben, James Reid, and Janine Teñoso, among others.

But perhaps the artist that both of them have collaborated with the most is each other. Zild and Tim have known each other since college, having studied Music Production at De La Salle-College of St. Benilde starting in 2015. "We used to hate each other during the first semester of college," Zild admits. The pair then found themselves working together for a school project, but instead ended up writing a song and realized that they clicked musically. "I think it was the first time that I met a really good producer," Zild says of Tim.

"Since the time we got partnered up for a school project, he's been my pal in music and in life," adds Tim. The resulting song, "In The Night," ended up being the debut single of Manila Magic, their electro-pop project that opened for Canadian fusion act BADBADNOTGOOD in 2016 and became a Wanderband finalist in 2017. While the duo hasn't been active since 2019, Tim maintains that Manila Magic is "still alive in whatever we do together."

And together they've done a lot, from Tim producing Zild's second solo album *Huminga* as well as several songs on the follow-up *Medisina*, to Zild playing bass on Ena Mori's "FALLINLOVE!," which Tim co-produced. "One of my favorite times we got to work together was on the *Huminga* record," narrates Tim. "It's funny because that was the first time we worked on music together that wasn't just for fun. I mean it was fun, but I think the project deserved [for us] to be more meticulous and intentional."

"It was during the pandemic and I remember having this almost four-hour call catching up with Zild," Tim continues, "and [it] ended [up] with him wanting to do a record that feels like *'nasa bundok pero nasa kwarto,'* and I said, 'Game.' That album was a big help to the both of us mentally and helped us grow in our friendship."

"[*Huminga*] was recorded during the pandemic and [it] was the only time that I really showed my vulnerability in songwriting to Tim," adds Zild. "I also learned a lot from Tim's production process."

Apart from this, both Tim and his brother Sam have been longtime

> **"I think playing music with your friends is just the best way to hang out"**
>
> TIM MARQUEZ

PHOTOS BY SHAIRA LUNA

members of Zild's live band, which, on occasion, has included Ena Mori (with whom Tim regularly performs live), SUYEN, and others who are successfully navigating their own respective musical paths. It can be said that a veritable "scene within a scene" has coalesced around Zild, Tim, and their peers, but according to Zild, they're "just really all good friends that love music and crave to find a 'community' that we can genuinely connect to."

"Besides believing in each other's music and having this undying camaraderie," shares Tim, "honestly, I think playing music with your friends is just the best way to hang out."

With music at the center of their friendship and frequent partnership, both Zild and Tim have grown to appreciate the art of collaboration, whether it's with each other, with others, or between their heroes and peers in the scene (Tim singles out "Superproxy" by the Eraserheads and Francis M as a personal favorite — "That was a moment where the artists didn't care what the people thought, and the E-heads and Francis M just did what they wanted"). And despite having done their fair share of collaborations, there's always something that makes them look forward to more that will surely come their way.

"[The process of] agreeing and disagreeing on things creates [results] that I won't think of by myself," affirms Zild. "Sometimes, contrasts breed creativity." Moreover, he clarifies, "My collaborator should be a friend and someone that I look up to."

"I think it's that unexpected magic in collaboration," agrees Tim. "Sometimes when you're working alone, having your own judgement of what will work and what will not can make ideas predictable or boring. It's a thrill when ideas are being thrown and no one is sure where it will go, but when the stars align, it'll end up beyond where you want it to be."

"For me, collaboration is more than just friendship," he concludes. "Though it is important, I think it goes hand in hand with taste. If you know or have a feeling that this person has similar tastes, there's a trust that will be built that both of you will be happy with the result. I think that's why we're happy with whatever we've made together." b

MEN IN BLACK
For a time, both Zild and One Click Straight dressed in goth-influenced attire and messed their hair up like The Cure's Robert Smith, inspiring their loyal audience (dubbed "The Panikids") to do the same

ROCKSTEADY

Coke Studio Philippines: Bridging Talent, Collaboration, and Marketing in Local Music

With its emphasis on collaboration — both between artists and the international brand — the music-based program stands as a testament for mixing art and commerce

BY GABRIEL SAULOG

> "The platform pairs seasoned musicians with emerging talents, encouraging the blending of genres and perspectives to create fresh and innovative music"

IN RECENT YEARS, Coke Studio Philippines has emerged as a significant platform that spotlights collaborations within the local music industry — both for artists and the brand itself.

While it began as a spin-off of the widely popular Pakistani variety show Coke Studio in 2017, the local iteration brought a unique twist to the concept, tailored to the country's rich and diverse music scene. What started as a televised program quickly evolved into an online series, capitalizing on the increasing dominance (and accessibility) of digital platforms. Today, it continues to make waves, providing a powerful stage for Filipino artists to showcase their talent and build lasting connections with audiences nationwide.

The success of Coke Studio Philippines lies not only in its ability to feature incredible music but also in its strategic marriage of marketing, branding, and collaboration. By attaching the Coca-Cola brand — one of the most globally recognized names — to the initiative, the platform elevates both the artists it features and the overall perception of Original Pilipino Music (OPM).

For an industry often dominated by a handful of mainstream artists, Coke Studio creates opportunities for rising stars to establish themselves while fostering deeper collaboration within the local music ecosystem.

A PLATFORM EMPOWERED BY BRANDING

The partnership between Coke Studio Philippines and Coca-Cola is more than just a sponsorship; it's a strategic alliance that amplifies the platform's impact. Coca-Cola's legacy as a brand synonymous with global culture and connectivity lends significant credibility to the series, positioning it as a prestigious stage for Filipino artists. For musicians, being featured on Coke Studio is not just an opportunity to perform, but is a chance to align their personal brand with a household name.

For emerging artists, this alignment can be career-defining. A co-sign from Coca-Cola translates to greater visibility, not only within the Philippines but also on a global scale. This association gives them access to audiences beyond their usual reach, including casual listeners who might not actively seek out local music. The scale of Coca-Cola's marketing campaigns, which encompasses television commercials, digital advertising, and strategic collaborations with influencers, ensures that the featured artists gain significant exposure.

THE ULTIMATE FANDOM CONCERT
FANDOM CONCERT

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COKE STUDIO PHILIPPINES

COLLABORATION AS A CATALYST FOR INDUSTRY GROWTH

At the heart of Coke Studio Philippines is its emphasis on collaboration. The platform pairs seasoned musicians with emerging talents, encouraging the blending of genres and perspectives to create fresh and innovative music. This collaborative format serves as both an artistic exercise and an industry masterclass, allowing participating artists to gain deeper insights into the workings of the music business.

Collaboration itself is a cornerstone of the music industry (especially in the Philippines), fostering relationships that can lead to new creative endeavors and business opportunities. For rising artists, collaborating with established names offers invaluable exposure, mentorship, and credibility. Meanwhile, established artists benefit from the fresh energy and innovative ideas brought by their less experienced counterparts. The resulting tracks often defy traditional genre boundaries, reflecting the evolving tastes of modern audiences and showcasing the versatility of Filipino music.

More importantly, these collaborations underscore the interconnected nature of the music industry. Success often hinges on the ability to build networks, foster relationships, and create synergy among artists, producers, and other stakeholders. Coke Studio exemplifies this principle, creating its own bubble within the broader music ecosystem where collaboration is both the means and the end.

MARKETING AS AN AMPLIFYING ASPECT OF COLLABORATION

From a marketing perspective, the collaborative format of Coke Studio Philippines is a masterstroke. It creates content that is not only musically engaging but also highly marketable. Collaborative tracks appeal to the fan bases of both artists, effectively doubling the reach and ensuring that the music resonates with a wider audience. The storytelling element, which highlights the creative process and the personal journeys of the artists, further enhances the emotional connection with listeners, turning casual viewers into invested fans.

Coca-Cola's involvement amplifies these efforts. The brand's marketing campaigns for Coke Studio are designed to create maximum impact, leveraging its vast resources and expertise to ensure that the series garners attention. From teaser campaigns on social media to full-scale promotional events (such as their concerts), Coca-Cola's marketing machine ensures that Coke Studio remains top of mind for audiences. This level of promotion is a boon for participating artists, many of whom lack the resources to mount similar campaigns independently.

In addition to boosting individual artists, the platform also elevates the OPM industry as a whole. By highlighting the richness and diversity of Filipino music, Coke Studio fosters greater appreciation for local talent, encouraging audiences to explore more of what the industry has to offer.

THE DIGITAL ADVANTAGE

The transition of Coke Studio Philippines from a network program to an online series reflects the shifting dynamics of music consumption. With the rise of streaming platforms and social media, digital has become the dominant mode of engagement for most music audiences. By embracing this shift, Coke Studio ensures that its content remains accessible and relevant to its target demographic, particularly younger listeners who are more likely to consume music online.

This digital-first approach also enhances the platform's ability to reach global audiences. Performances, episodes, and recordings are readily available on YouTube and Spotify, ensuring that Filipino artists can connect with listeners beyond the Philippines. This global accessibility aligns with the broader trend of music globalization — where artists from different parts of the world increasingly gain international recognition through streaming platforms.

By positioning itself as a digital platform, Coke Studio Philippines not only stays ahead of industry trends but also reinforces its role as a gateway for Filipino artists to the global stage.

TRANSFORMING THE ARTIST SCENE

Beyond its immediate impact on marketing and exposure, Coke Studio Philippines plays a transformative role within the local artist scene. The platform encourages artists to step out of their comfort zones, experiment with new sounds, and engage in creative risk-taking. This spirit of innovation benefits not only the artists themselves but also the industry as a whole, fostering a culture of creativity and collaboration.

Such connections also help to build a more cohesive and supportive artist community — where success is viewed as a shared achievement rather than a zero-sum game.

CREATIVITY MEETS STRATEGY

With everything it has accomplished for the scene, Coke Studio Philippines is more than a music platform — it is a strategic and cultural powerhouse that combines the artistry of music with the precision of marketing. By attaching itself to a globally recognized brand like Coca-Cola, the series not only elevates individual artists but also transforms the broader perception of Filipino music.

As it continues to evolve, Coke Studio Philippines stands as a testament to the power of partnerships, both between artists and between art and commerce. It proves that when creativity meets strategy, the results can resonate far beyond the stage — creating lasting impact for artists, audiences, and the industry alike. b

GLOBAL REACH
Having evolved from a network program to a digital showcase, the growing reach of Coke Studio Philippines continues to be felt beyond the sphere of Filipino audiences

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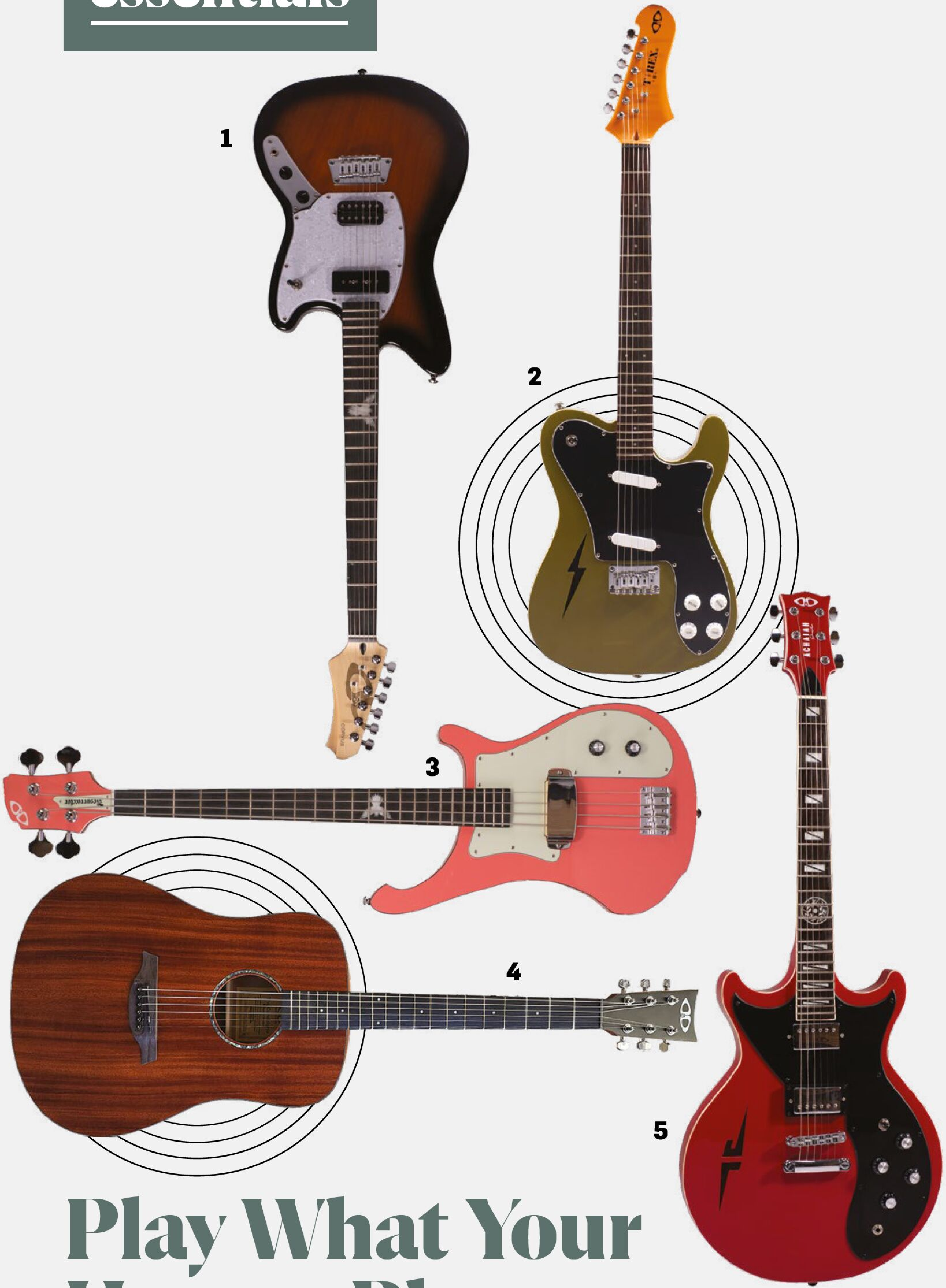

Play What Your Heroes Play

More often than not, many aspiring guitar players try to buy the same instruments that their idols use — that is, if they could afford them — because they want to achieve that same sound and look onstage. Proudly homegrown guitar builders D&D Music makes it much easier by offering unique, quality, and affordable instruments designed by the country's top players themselves, down to the smallest detail. From singer-songwriters like Barbie Almalbis to modern metal behemoths like Queso, many of your guitar and bass heroes have a signature model crafted by D&D.

1.CORVUS ELECTRIC GUITAR (2-TONE SUNBURST)
Typecast singer-guitarist Steve Badiola used to borrow guitars during his band's early days, and now he has a signature model to his name. Its combination of P90 and humbucker pickups gives it tonal versatility no matter what genre you play, and despite its emo connections, the Corvus has a subtle offset body that appeals to grunge and indie rockers.

2.T-REX ELECTRIC GUITAR (OLIVE GREEN)
Designed by Mong Alcaraz of Sandwich and Chicosci, the T-Rex pays homage to a classic electric guitar design, but features a lightweight semi-hollow body and a lightning bolt-shaped f-hole. Its pair of single coil pickups guarantee a wide range of tones that work for both his bands and everything in between, but there's a humbucker-equipped version, if you prefer.

3. RESURRECTOR BASS GUITAR (SALMON PINK)
The Resurrector is Typecast bassist Chi Resurreccion's signature bass (get it?) and it sounds as great as it looks. Its single humbucking pickup, volume, and tone controls make it a straightforward, no-fuss rock machine, and its striking but not annoyingly vibrant salmon pink finish will ensure that you'll stand out onstage.

4. CANDELARIA JUNIOR ACOUSTIC GUITAR
When man-of-a-dozen-bands Raymund Marasigan writes a song, he reaches for his Candelaria. Fondly named after his hometown in Quezon Province, this junior-sized acoustic guitar is compact enough to carry anywhere, but its mahogany body and Cherub GT-2 pickup give it a big sound, whether or not it's plugged in.

5. ACHAIA ELECTRIC GUITAR (RED)
Jomal Linao plays for several heavy bands — Kamikazee, Juggernaut, Talata, and Skychurch — and his signature Achaia is all he needs to achieve those crunchy tones. Its stoptail bridge gives it tuning stability despite playing riff after pummeling riff, while its double cutaway design lets you reach and bend those high notes easily when it's your turn to solo. b

chartbreaker

The Inescapable Magic Of Dionela And Jay R's "sining"

Joining forces, the two R&B hitmakers have crafted a titular masterpiece that has captivated millions of Filipino listeners with its laid-back instrumentals and spellbinding vocabulary

BY MAYKS GO

IF THERE'S ANYTHING that our music charts have taught us in the past year or so, it's that there's a certain kind of magic that comes from collaborations. Beyond bringing new artists onto curious listeners' radars, these team-ups possess the inherent potential to discover one-of-a-kind musical possibilities that can only come from two or more creative souls joining forces and finding synergy.

Among the wave of stellar and impactful collaborations we've seen in the past few months, what better way to exemplify this than with the first ever collaboration track that topped both of *Billboard Philippines*' Hot 100 and Top Philippine Songs charts?

First seeing the light of day back in early June 2024, "sining" by rising singer-songwriter Dionela with R&B icon Jay R quickly found its way into the hearts and playlists of the Filipino people. On the charts of the week of August 3, 2024, less than two months after its release, the heartfelt single gifted the two artists with their first ever *Billboard Philippines* No. 1, objectively reflecting that, yes, the track is an undeniable hit throughout the entirety of the country.

Right off the bat, upon your first listen of "sining," what will most likely catch your attention is its fluid, almost seamless way of blending together Filipino and English lyrics. Backed by its laid-back, romantic R&B instrumentals and unmistakable timbre of both Dionela and Jay R's sugary vocals, the track is imbued with a string of rich and, dare I say, adventurous vocabulary that will pique anyone's curiosity and have you reaching for the dictionary.

While it might leave some bewildered or perhaps even confused at first, it's here where "sining" finds its unique charm. It encapsulates the perhaps familiar feeling of being so in love with someone that no amount of common, everyday words in one's personal lexicon would be enough to describe. And, unsurprisingly, with our people's penchant for the romantic, it's something countless Filipinos know all too well and resonate with.

Beyond amassing millions upon millions of streams across various platforms since its release, "sining" has opened new doors for the rising Dionela, who released his debut single way back in 2019. As the track fully catapulted him into the mainstream consciousness, he continued to stick to his guns and his faith, wholeheartedly believing in his music and the potential it holds. Meanwhile, for Jay R, it has led to a whole new flock of young listeners to discover more and more of his music, with them finding out exactly why the celebrated hitmaker is the Philippines' undisputed King of R&B.

Fast-forward to early 2025, "sining" has continued to carry both Dionela's and Jay R's name to the greatest of heights, helping them gain more and more listeners each day, maintain top spots on the charts every week, and — especially for the up-and-coming Dionela — get bigger and bigger gigs locally with every passing month.

"Noong 2019 masayang masaya na ako pag may sampung taong nanonood sa 'kin sa bar gigs. *Imagine ano 'yung nararamdaman ko sa mga oras na 'to,"* Dionela remarked in a social media post he made back in late 2024, featuring a photo of him and his band in front of thousands of people after an outdoor performance. *"Maraming salamat po sa pagmamahal palagi,"* he continues.

With the year just getting started, there's definitely a lot more to be excited about from these two R&B stars. "Thank you to all the music lovers out there who blast our songs everywhere you go. More to come for 2025," stated Jay R in a year-end post in December. "Strap on your seatbelts, [it's] gonna be [a] fun ride."

No. 01

BILLBOARD PHILIPPINES HOT 100 AND *BILLBOARD PHILIPPINES* TOP PHILIPPINES SONGS (AUGUST 2024)

DIONELA PHOTO COURTESY OF UMG PHILIPPINES. JAY R PHOTOGRAPHED BY LYNDON ASUNCION. CREATIVE DIRECTION BY KENNETH DIMAANO. SITTINGS EDITOR BRET JACKSON. PRODUCTION COORDINATION MIKA CRUZ. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTED BY MILES WENCY.

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